



# JEEVADHARA

## **SOCIAL MINISTRY OF THE INDIAN CHURCH**

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Edited by  
**Mathew Illathuparampil**

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# jeevadhara

A JOURNAL FOR SOCIO-RELIGIOUS RESEARCH

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## Social Ministry of the Indian Church

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## Editorial

Extending helping hands to the poor has been one of the constant concerns of Christian faith communities. Indian church forms no exception to this general rule. It has got a commendable track record in this ministry of being a Good Samaritan to the poor and the afflicted. While acknowledging the admirable results of a well established social service ministry of the church in the country, it is reasonable to explore the future prospects of the same ministry in view of the newly emerging social realities. This issue of *Jeevadhara* approaches the social services of the church in India more in terms of placing them in a macro social context of the evolving India.

Varghese Mattamana in his Review article on the Social Ministry of the Indian Church gives a brief overview of the social service done currently by the church. It helps us also to recognize the challenges faced by social service ministers in the field. Joseph Xavier in his article talks about the need of adapting social ministry in view of the new world order that has emerged in recent times. He affirms that fundamental ministry must be a people oriented development program; not just distributing charity to the ill-fed people.

Assessing the social ministry of the church in general Valle Vijaya Joji Babu holds the strong view that the church has not yet become the church of the poor; it remains a church for the poor. Until such a transformation takes place, the church will remain a generous neighbour to the poor people, it will not become their 'sister' who is deeply bonded with the poor and shares fully their plight. Work for religious harmony is not traditionally counted as a social ministry. Subhash Anand in his article establishes that in contemporary times it is a valuable ministry which the church can offer to any multi-religious society like India. In

order to carry out this mission, he rightly argues that, the church still needs to develop an adequate theology and an authentic praxis. The Church, for long, defined itself as a spiritual body concerned primarily with the care of its own faithful. But having understood politics as the important means for establishing common good, the church has begun to pay sufficient attention to politics. P.T. Mathew in his contribution reviews the role of the Indian church in politics in the past and proposes Church's engagement in political affairs as integral to its mission. He argues that church's interventions of a socio-political nature forms an inevitable part of its social ministry.

What the church can hope to achieve by its social ministry is to become an engaging presence in the civil society. It requires the church to be proactive also in its social responsibility. Perhaps, the greater challenge which the church faces in its social ministry today is to become proactive, rather than showing responsorial charity. This issue of *Jeevadhara* is meant to prepare an initial theological ground for such a large scale change of approach in the social ministry of the church.

Mangalapuzha, Aluva  
Kerala, India.

**Mathew Illathuparampil**

# **Social Ministry of the Indian Church: A Review**

**Varghese Mattamana**

Caritas India, the official organ of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India, formally leads and coordinates the social ministry of the church. Varghese Mattamana, executive director of Caritas India, in this article reviews the current status of social ministry of the Indian church. He makes a very broad survey of the tasks undertaken by Caritas India. He also mentions the challenges faced by social ministry in India.

## **Introduction**

Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI) is a permanent association of the Catholic Hierarchy of India. It was formally constituted in September 1944 at the Conference of Metropolitans held in Madras. Its objectives are to facilitate coordinated study and discussion of issues affecting the Church, and adoption of a common policy and effective action in all matters concerning the interests of the Church in India. CBCI also undertakes officially various social service ministries through the agency of Caritas India. This article gives a broad overview of the social ministries of the Indian church done, especially through Caritas India.

## **Caritas India**

Caritas India as the National Organization of the CBCI for Social Concern and Development was founded in 1962. It is recognized as a leading agency in responding to the natural and other disasters in the



sub-Continent, and serves the poor and marginalized throughout the country regardless of caste, creed or ethnicity. Caritas India is a network organization with 160 local counterparts who are the Diocesan Social Service Societies (DSSS) and hundreds of NGO partners. Through partnerships, Caritas India strives to reach the remotest parts of the country. Caritas India collaborates with the central and state governments to provide assistance and services throughout the country. It works with national and international partners to provide services in

- Environmental and disaster management services
- Programme support services for community-based organizations
- HIV and AIDS programme
- Gender and development
- Natural resources management
- Integrated development program through empowerment and action
- Capacity-building
- Public relations and communication on social issues of poverty and justice

The social ministry of the Indian Church is powered with a huge human re-source base. Many of them are well trained in social works and well-versed in the Catholic social teaching. Apart from the Diocesan level social ministry, there are also social services done by various religious congregations. Hundreds of lay people participate in the services rendered by Caritas network. Quite understandable that social work of the Indian church is guided by Catholic social teachings.

### Major Social Concerns of the Indian Church

Translating the above mentioned values of the social teachings of the church into the Indian context, major concerns of social work in India are identified in areas such as

1. The struggle against discrimination and poverty
2. Work for equity and welfare of Dalit Christians
3. Resisting threats to Minority rights and religious freedom
4. Making appeal for just population and development policies



5. Take firm stand against contraception and abortion
6. Recognize and utilize the role of the mass media
7. Emphasis on national integration
8. Concern for politics and international issues.

### **The Challenge to the Mission of the Church Today**

There have always been many challenges to the social mission and vision of the church. The ultimate mission of the Church is to establish the kingdom of God. In fact, the burden of expectations on the church is very high. It has to wholeheartedly support the establishment of an international order that includes a genuine respect for legitimate freedom. The greater part of the world is in a state of such poverty that it is as if Christ himself were crying out in the mouths of these poor people to the charity of his disciples. It is a duty of the whole people of God, as per the teaching and example of the bishops, to alleviate the hardships within the limits of its means, giving generously, as was the ancient custom of the Church, not merely out of what is superfluous, but also out of what is necessary.

### **The Challenge to the Population Profile**

The Census Operation of 2001 in India is said to be manipulated. The next Census of India will be conducted in the year 2011. We have a challenge before us to prepare our people for a fair and proper Census. Results of a manipulated and unfair Census would be very costly to the nation.

### **The Challenge from anti-Christian and anti-Secular Forces**

In the last 10 years in different States of India and in the Centre, *anti-secular forces* have planted its agents in the government machinery in order to fulfill its economic, political and religious agenda. The concerted attack against Christians and Muslims has nothing to do with protecting the belief systems of the Hindus, but it is to capture political power at the cost of minority religions. The latest attempt by anti secular forces is the demand made through their political organisations to declare the Christian tribals as non-tribals. Behind this demand there lies the political and economic agenda to divide the tribals on religious lines and demolish their identity and rights with the help of the judiciary. Hence the challenges before us today are:

- I. How to respond to the anti-secular forces's concept of one nation, one people, one language (Sanskrit) and one culture in pluralistic Indian society?
2. How can we be a vigilant Church that is ready to face fundamentalism and communalism, various attacks against our missionaries by fanatic groups?
3. What is our role in contributing to communal harmony?
4. How can we become authentic witnesses of the Good News in our life and work as committed clergy, religious and laity?

### **The Challenges in the Field of Education**

#### ***A. The Commercialization of Education***

The Church considers education as a service to the people for their empowerment. The educational institutions of the Church have been in the vanguard of the education of the masses, especially the tribals in the remote areas. We have been complementing the efforts of the Government in the education of the people. But today education, from being a service to humanity, has become a business, and the poor cannot afford to highly paid English medium education. Unfortunately some of the educational institutions of the Church have also become part of this business.

#### ***B. Vocational Education***

We may have to think of education for life and livelihood. The present educational system has contributed to the increase in the number of educated unemployed. The educated unemployed youth have become a social problem to the society at large. The number of drop-outs among the tribal students is high, partially on account of the way the school is functioning. The tribal children accompany their parents at work site and for food gathering in the forest. The new concept of community colleges relevant to the context of the needs of the community is of great importance. This is an area where the Church needs still to invest its attention, personnel and money.

#### ***C. Communalisation of Education***

The syllabus of the school curriculum is still pan Indian and politicized rather than contextualized to the local situation. The syllabi of the schools

do neglect the local history and its context. The anti-secular forces know the importance of education for its political gain. Hence the Saffronization of education was one of the highest priorities of the anti-secular forces. The syllabi of the schools were manipulated in order to poison young minds and contribute to the communal divide. But the Catholic Church, the pioneer of education has been a silent spectator to this dangerous situation.

#### *D. Problems of Minority Educational Institutions*

The minority institutions themselves are divided. It is a fact that certain vested interests have been creating various hurdles to our educational institutions under one pretext or another and bottle necks are created in the following areas:

- (a) Opening permission for schools
- (b) Recognition of schools
- (c) Minority declaration certificates
- (d) Appointment and approval of our teachers
- (e) Disparities in the pay scales of the government teachers, minority school teachers
- (f) Undue delays in payment of wages
- (g) Denial of stipend, scholarships and mid-day meals
- (h) Interference in the management of the schools

Hence, there remain a host of issues which call for our attention in the area of education. Some of them are mentioned below.

How to optimize education for all, irrespective of caste and creed distinctions but focusing on the poor and marginalized?

How to turn the present educational system from literacy oriented to life-oriented pattern?

How to promote the education of women?

How to motivate the educated and employed people from rural areas to educate the uneducated?

What can be done to change the dismal functioning of the government education systems, ill-equipped teaching system and infrastructure of the schools?



How to respond in a corporate way to the discriminatory policy of government towards minorities in the field of education?

How to impart value education that will benefit individual and society?

### **Challenges to Health and Hygiene**

The Government hospitals in India are not sufficiently equipped to match the need of the population, specially the poor. Responsibility and accountability of the health personnel seem to be much less than the ideal. The mushrooming of private hospitals without proper personnel and quakes in the rural area have become a liability rather than an asset to the people. The Church is devoting a sizable proportion of its personnel and finance in the health service. Given this context, social ministry of the church in health sector faces the following challenges.

How to help evolve a system of medical care that is affordable by the poor?

How to make people as part of the health care system?

What are the opportunities for self-reliant and self--health care?

How can we promote indigenous health care system?

What to do to improve the quality of our existing health care system?

How to promote concerted effort of all the actors in a given region/ area?

### **Challenges of Development**

The objectives of democracy and development are to enhance the capabilities and freedom of choices of people. Development has resulted in making the rich people richer and the poor people poorer. There are huge gaps between policy and implementation, between policy and financial outlays, and between policy and the needs of the people.

The enactment of social policy has been characterized by overlaps between policies, periodic recasting of existing policies in new forms, and the employment of these measures as political tools that address constituencies and forge vote banks. The policies meant for the poor are indiscriminately generalised, mismanaged and inefficiently



implemented; it is often the non-poor who are the beneficiaries. Although the provision of social goods falls more or less within the governance of State governments, the Planning Commission, through the Five Year Plans, determines strategy, priority, and allocation of resources.

Our key challenge of the social ministry of the church is whether it can become catalysts, facilitators and motivators to empower the poor and the marginalized so that they are able to avail themselves of the schemes and facilities provided for them specially by schemes such as NREGA, RTI, Education for all and NRHM. This should replace our predominant methodology of trying to provide goods and services and make people objects of development rather than they become the subject of development.

The Panchayat Raj system is meant to provide the necessary structure and the means necessary for integrated development of the rural community by the community. The present expectations of the people from the Church, monetary and other help may not be needed once the Panchayat Raj is in operation, because ample financial resources will there be with the people.

Understanding the Panchayat Raj and becoming a part of the Panchayat system as animators and specialists will enhance the role of the Church in the socio-pastoral field and ameliorate the financial burden of the Dioceses and Religious communities. Our efforts, commitment and experience should be used to promote interface with PRIs and enable the poor and marginalized without the basis of caste and creed to tap the resources available for them.

## **Conclusion**

Reviewing the present social ministry of the church, we certainly see a gap between the ideal and the reality that exists. Our further responsibility is to bridge the gap that exists. People are our key stakeholders and together with the people, we can achieve what we aspire to do. The larger issue is to facilitate the empowerment of the people through their own advocacy with the local governance and influencing policies at the wider levels. With the help of genuinely likeminded organizations and movements, we can create awareness,

backup and strive to create positive impact in the larger society. We will need to make adequate structural arrangements in this fast changing environmental scenario. Internally, there is a need to review and add new dimensions to our own thinking process. We need to transform our structures to become apt and suitable to the present and developing social conditions. Briefly, the social ministry done by the Indian church through the agency of Caritas India is commendable in terms of its variety and quality; however, it needs to face new challenges in the field, perhaps replacing or improving older approaches which functioned well once.

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# **The Future of the Social Ministry of the Indian Church**

**Joseph Xavier**

Social ministry undertaken by the Indian church has been following a traditional path, often attending more to micro issues. It was and is still a need, given the large number of differently affected and afflicted people. But times have changed; new socio-economic structures have evolved, calling for new approaches to the social ministry of the church. In this article Joseph Xavier analyses the existing social ministry of the church and proposes newer areas which demand the church's social attention. That includes proposing a people-oriented development paradigm and developing pro-people development ideology. He thinks that the church needs to expand the rights-space of people. Besides, it has to strengthen citizenship identity of men and women and ensure participative and democratic culture. Challenging institutionalised forms of discrimination, promoting ethical market, responsible State, and an enlightened civil society also would form part of the social ministry of the church.

## **Introduction**

Social mission has been one of the defining characteristics of Christianity. No doubt, the understanding and manifestations of social mission of the Church all over the world and in India has gone through reasonable changes in the last three to four decades. For long, driven by the compassion of Jesus the Church was involved in the Good Samaritan model of response, in reaching out to its neighbours in need. The response was primarily of top down model. The Church appealed to the good hearted wealthy people, and countries to extend a helping

hand to the poor and the needy, particularly those in developing and less developed countries. Christians in the developed countries were asked to follow the Christian principles of charity and share from their abundance a part to care for the underprivileged. Consequently those in the developing countries were largely treated as recipients.

A cursory look at the social response of the Indian Church down the years clearly shows that it is deeply wedded to the developmental approach. As it is, it would appear that the developmental works have had an alienating effect in the sense that they seem to have anaesthetized the Christian conscience regarding its social and political responsibility. There needs to be a deeper change in the whole approach in such a way that Christians are not only made to participate actively in the works planned by the funding agencies, but that Christians collectively as believing community respond to the situation of poverty and oppression in the name of their faith. The social dimension of faith calls not so much for developmental works as for political action<sup>1</sup>. In other words, to a large extent the response of the Church to the structural injustices has not been adequate or more specifically the response has been dominated by humanitarian considerations than creatively responding to the root causes of the injustices.

While the post Vatican II brought in fresh air in contextualising the spirit of the gospel amidst growing challenges of the times, the emergence of liberation theology and human rights discourse necessitated the Church to go through a process of conversion to rearticulate its social mission from the perspective of the poor. The purpose of this article is not so much to unearth or critique the social response of the Church in India in the past, but to look for future directions to make the social ministry of the Church relevant as per the changing context of our time. Any attempt to evolve a comprehensive response today must take the contemporary socio-political, economic and cultural context seriously.

### **Understanding the 'new' world order**

Eighties and nineties of the last century witnessed emergence of a

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1 Felix Wilfred, *The Emergent Church in a New India* (Trivandrum: Jayamatha Training Institute Press) 27 – 29.



‘new’ world order. Expanding his thesis written in 1989, ‘The End of History’, Francis Fukuyama, in 1992 wrote a book titled, “The End of History and the Last Man”. In the context of the collapse of USSR, which put a full stop to the first, second and third world concepts, Fukuyama wrote, “What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government”. An optimist Fukuyama in 19<sup>th</sup> century ended up as pessimist in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and said, “The science and technology that were supposed to save humankind, instead ended up destroying it and today’s modern society creates modern conflicts.”<sup>2</sup>

In this context, to a large extent, the quality of life for the next generation and society, particularly for the dalits, adivasis and other marginalised groups will depend on how these could creatively deal with modern conflicts and confront the various anti-poor ideologies of the world today. In the recent encyclical “*Caritas in veritate*”, Pope Benedict XVI highlights justice and common good as the constitutive elements of love. Talking about commitment to development in an increasingly globalised society the Pope says justice is the primary way of charity. Going beyond development of an individual the Pope very clearly articulates common good as the development of all of us, particularly those who need our care and concern. “In an increasingly globalized society, the common good and the effort to obtain it cannot fail to assume the dimensions of the whole human family, that is to say, the community of peoples and nations, in such a way as to shape the *earthly city* in unity and peace, rendering it to some degree an anticipation and a prefiguration of the undivided *city of God*.”<sup>3</sup>

### The Emerging New India

The problem of the people of India today cannot be viewed from the skewed understanding of poverty or resourcelessness, though mass poverty, destitution and malnourishment of many children are real issues.

2 <http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/us/fukuyama.htm>

3 *Caritas in veritat*, no 7.

While the availability of bottled water even in remote villages display economic boom, safe drinking water is not ensured for a large number of rural poor. While the twenty four hour state of art medical facilities provided by the privatized health care systems are available for a price to extend one's longevity of life, many children still die of preventable diseases such as malaria, and worse still of malnutrition. In 2003–04 when a number of children and women died of starvation, the point in question was not lack of food grains but the inability to reach food grains from the FCI godowns to the poor. Recently in an interview to NDTV, commenting about strategies to address the drought situations this year, development economist Jean Derezé said that the drought can be handled. The godowns of India have more than enough food stocks. The systems and structures are in place. What we need is a strong political will to reach the food grains to the poor.

During 1960s and 1970s, when the world economy was growing at 5 per cent per year, India was growing at the rate of 3.5 percent. Since the population growth was slightly over 2 per cent during this period, India's per capita income grew at less than 2 per cent. After 1980s, while the world economy slowed down to 3.5 per cent Indian economy grew at the rate of 6 to 8 percent per annum with population growth at less than 2 per cent. Therefore the per capita income over the last two decades or so has grown at about 4 per cent. However, this doubling of the growth rate in per capita income has not made corresponding dent on mass poverty. At the end of the twentieth century, according to one estimate, India had 260 million people or roughly one fourth of its population under the so-called 'poverty line', the very minimum needed for existence<sup>4</sup>. Yet another indicator that could explain the development of the common masses is the Human Development Index, which is a composite index that takes into account health condition of the people, access to education, as well as income. In 2007, for example, India was ranked 127 among 175 countries. In 2008 it went down in the ranking and it was placed at 128<sup>5</sup> and in 2009 shockingly it further went down to 134.<sup>6</sup>

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4 Amit Bhaduri, *Development with Dignity* (New Delhi: National Book Trust, India) 2–5.

5 UNDP Report, 2008

6 *The Hindu*, Madurai Edition, 6 October 2009, 11.

Despite the global recession the UPA government projects to achieve 6 percent GDP, while many of the countries in Europe and US are struggling to end negative growth rate. As many studies reveal, India has witnessed booming economic growth in the last two decades. The number of multi-millionaires of India is on the increase every year. Still, the irony is that while India is increasingly becoming rich, the number of the poor in India is also on the increase. Ravallian in *Economic and Political Weekly of India* in 2008 wrote that in spite of recent economic growth, poverty in India remains high. Using the recent data from the World Bank's International Comparison Program (ICP), a global price survey was used to calculate purchasing power parity (PPP) rates in which India participated for the first time in 20 years, to examine India's poverty trends since 1981 in relation to other developing countries. As per the study the number of people living with less than \$ 1.25 rose from 421 to 456 million during 1981-2005 in India. The number of people living with an income between \$ 1.00 and \$ 1.25 rose from 124 million to 189 million during 1981-2005<sup>7</sup>. The gap between the rich and poor has widened. The poor of the country, to a large extent, feel that they have become victims of the narrow interest of the political parties and their anti-people ideologies. The marginalised communities like the dalits, adivasis, women, minorities, unorganised and traditional workers and youth who have faced historical and systemic injustices all along, feel that they have been pushed further to periphery to eke out their survival.

The crisis that we are experiencing today in India is not the result of a natural selection process but definitely wo/man made. But it is not any wo/man but the ones loaded with ideology. It is an ideological wo/man, group of wo/men, belonging to a particular class in the present society. Unlike earlier years these cannot be located in a continent or country but they are spread across towns, cities countries and continents. It is a class that is virtually connected! It is an invisible body, clearly working in and through democracies and dictatorships, governments and bureaucracies, local as well as world institutions and peace initiators as well as arms traders, ultimately creating invisible

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7 Martin Ravallian, "A Global Perspective on Poverty in India", *EPW* Vol. XLIII, No 43 (25 Oct 2008).

exploitative structures. So obviously the social ministry of the Church will make a dent in the larger society in future in so far as it is able to pro-actively promote people oriented ideology and effectively counter the present model of development paradigm.

### **Towards a people oriented development paradigm**

Down the years the Church has become deeply aware that true development is not possible without serious attention to the questions of human dignity, human rights and environmental justice. But there is a huge gap between this theoretical understanding and concrete manifestations of social transformative processes at the ground level. The challenge for the Church is to progressively reduce this gap. The issue at stake is not merely introduction of some new programmes of action but a paradigm shift. With the historical institutional luggage and dependency attitudes developed with the donor agencies the paradigm shift is not an easy process. But, there is no way out.

‘Overcoming poverty is not a gesture of charity; it is an act of justice. It is the protection of fundamental human right, the right to dignity and a decent life’. This was the message of Nelson Mandela from Johannesburg on the occasion of ‘Making Poverty History’ a world wide campaign that took place in the first weekend of July 2005<sup>8</sup>. The challenge for the Church is to consciously move from welfare centric and developmental approach to movement based and rights based approach. Thanks to the new stance taken by the donor agencies, many are shifting their base to Africa. While the contribution of such agencies, mostly from Europe for the development of the poor has to be acknowledged duly, it is high time that the Churches go through a serious soul searching process to evaluate and develop new perspectives to strengthen the social mission of the Church.

Amartya Sen defined development as freedom; development requires the removal of major sources of unfreedom. The four major ideologies which cripple development and realization of the human right of the dalits, adivasis, women, children and other marginalized communities are neo-liberalism, religious fundamentalism, patriarchy and casteism. These are not exclusive dominant ideologies but are



inter-related and inter-dependent. The social ministry of the Church has to necessarily evolve perspectives and strategies to creatively respond to these anti-poor, anti-human ideologies. Without entering into a detailed discourse on these ideologies and their impact on the poor an attempt is made here to indicate some directions which could be taken up for further reflection to reconceptualise the social ministry of the Church to effectively face the challenges of our times.

### **A. Developing pro-people Development Ideology**

Pro-globalisation lobby claim that 'There Is No Alternative' (TINA) to neo-liberalism and they demand the people and countries to accept it as inevitable. They demand that market should be freed from state control so that real progress will take place. But the Socialists claim that 'Socialism Is The Alternative' (SITA) to the present day crisis. And they condemn all other ideologies either as capitalist or as imperialist. But there are serious apprehensions raised regarding the type of socialism that is being promoted in many countries. The example is India itself, where the Marxists follow market dictum at the cost of the poor.

Recent red developments, particularly in West Bengal, have raised critical and uncomfortable questions leading to rupture in the ideological relationship between civil society groups and the ideologues of left political parties. One of the major achievements of the people's struggles at Nandigram is that it has exposed the Indian Marxists and the growing contradictions within their ideological discourse. The blood of the innocents of Nandigram has also created a 'sense of shame' among the true Marxists who still work beyond the party lines, but within the ambit of the civil society institutions. The statement by veteran Marxist and the politburo member Mr. Jyoti Basu was a clear indication of evaporation of Marxism from Indian Marxists. "Socialism is not possible now; we have spoken about building classless society, but that was a long time ago. Socialism is our political agenda and was mentioned in our party document, but capitalism will continue to be the compulsion of the future" (*Indian Express*, Jan 6, 2008). Following this Mr. Buddhadeb Bhattacharya also commented that there was no need for any political interference in the process of industrialization. Later, almost as an afterthought, Mr. Jyoti Basu said, "We also should safeguard worker's interests" (*The Hindu*, Jan 6, 2008).

Critiquing both TINA and SITA syndromes the civil society organizations look for an alternative with broad based people's participation. They believe that Globalisation is not the result of a natural process and it is human-made. If it is human-made, this ideology can be dismantled with another pro-people ideology. The Social Forum process with its slogan, 'Another World is Possible' is one of the expressions of such search processes. The Church organisations and Church supported groups played a substantial role in taking the social forum processes forward. In the name of 'realism' while many individuals and groups have surrendered to TINA syndrome it is important that the Church keeps the hope of the poor alive by constructively promoting alternative thinking. The global recession has once again made it sufficiently clear that capitalism is untenable.

The growing ideological vacuum calls for the attention of all of us to meaningfully fill it with mass oriented, rights based ideology. Critiquing the fall out of left parties in the recent general elections, Prabhat Patnaik argues that the unprecedented setback is primarily due to the failure of the left parties in evolving viable alternatives. The Indian masses look for more than anti-American and pro-poor slogans<sup>9</sup>. Prof. Rajini Kothari was emphatic on this aspect. He says, "The engines of growth are declining, the organised working class is not growing, the process of marginalization is spreading, technology is turning anti-people, development has become an instrument of the privileged class, and the state has lost its role as an agent of transformation, or even as a mediator, in the affairs of civil society. Democracy has become the play ground for growing corruption, criminalization, repression and intimidation for large masses of people. There is a virtual collapse of government in many parts of India. Available ideologies and formal politics seem unable to cope with this overall crisis and there is discontent and despair in the air. A massive process of depolitization is taking place. Hence the need for a new genre of organizations and a new conception of political roles."<sup>10</sup>

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9 Patnaik, prabhat, "Reflections on the Left", *EPW* Vol XLIV, No 28 (July 11, 2009).

10 R. Kothari, "Grassroots: Seminar," 1984, No. 293, 216 – 220.

## B. Expanding Rights Space

One of the major contributions of the Church in the past few centuries has been largely in education and health. No doubt, the Churches have played a major role in taking education and health to rural areas, particularly to the dalits and adivasis. With privatisation of education and health systems the state has abdicated its social responsibility. This phenomenon has drastically reduced the concept of 'service space.' Most of the Church institutions, both education and health, have no other go except to adopt privatisation policies and are in a tremendous transition mode. For the survival of the existing institutions, and in some cases for the sustenance of the religious and church structures and religious orders, introducing self-financing courses and unaided schools have become a necessity. Within this limited service space, prickled by religious consciousness a small number of poor are admitted with concessions and subsidies. Option for the poor is slowly turning out in defining the poor as 'subsidy people'. This phenomenon can be clearly seen in the changing scenario of education sector.

As per a recent study conducted by CBCI on education, a drastic downward trend is seen in imparting formal and non-formal education and technical training. The number of schools started from 1991 to 2000, from LKG to Higher Secondary/Junior colleges is around 2143. From 2001 to 2006 the number has come down to 685. About 154 formal technical schools were established from 1991 to 2000, which has come down to 54 during 2001-2006. Regarding establishment of non-formal educational training centres, 76 were established from 1991 to 2000, whereas from 2001 to 2006 only 23 were established. Yet another alarming data is that among the Church run schools only 39 per cent are aided and about 46 per cent are unaided today<sup>11</sup>. What does this trend indicate? Our services are increasingly becoming available only to those who have the capacity to pay for it. So, increase in unaided institutions would necessarily hamper the service space and subsequently option for the poor itself.

We cannot follow the UPA model. The Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) is all out to promote privatization of service

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11 CBCI website

sector on the one hand and on the other hand returns a small share of the tax payers' money to the poor and the needy through pro-poor policies and programmes like Right to Education, NREGS, etc.<sup>12</sup> This is definitely a double standard. The Church cannot serve two masters. In this conflicting situation the poor show us the way. Although the electoral system works imperfectly, and the rich are often able to purchase votes, the maturing of Indian democracy has meant that the power of the rich and powerful to determine the outcomes of elections has increasingly been constrained.<sup>13</sup> Recent proclamation that the UPA government is envisaging yet another pro-poor policy like right to food is a clear indication that still democracy has an impact on the political leadership of our country. One of the primary agenda of the social mission of the Church is to organise and mobilise people to demand the state to enact more pro-poor policies and to ensure proper implementation of the same to effectively expand rights space.

### **C. Strengthening Citizenship Identity**

The Constitution of India provides necessary legal framework to enable the citizenship identity of the dalits, adivasis and women. It is alleged that the Churches have not sufficiently emphasised the citizenship identity of the poor as much as they have emphasised the religious identity. The role of Christianity in the socio-economic development of these marginalised communities is widely acknowledged. Moved with compassion, the Churches reached out to dalits and adivasis and initiated programmes of action to fulfil primarily the basic needs through education, health and expanding employment opportunities. In many instances these activities were run parallel to the state programmes or without much linkage to state apparatus. Instead of demanding the welfare state to fulfil its duty to provide basic education, health and employment opportunities to the dalits and advasis, the Churches took up the burden on themselves and fulfilled to an extent possible the basic needs of the poor. Obviously it was not possible for the Churches to reach out to all the poor, even within a limited area of operation. Moreover as the beneficiaries of the Church

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12 BJP in Crisis, *EPW* Vol XLIV, No 35 (August 29, 2009).

13 Amit Bhaduri, *op.cit.*, p 12.



have been largely the poor any activity that was undertaken by the Church was given a religious conversion colouring and often Christians have been victims of the developmental process itself.

The Church has a lot to learn from the recent attack on Christians in Kandhamal, Mysore and in other places. The presence of the Church in Kandhamal is just 200 years old. With the entry of the Churches there is a perceptible socio-economic development of dalit and adivasi Christians in this district. But the core issue, namely, ensuring the political rights was not seriously pursued. A sustained anti-Christian propaganda by the communal forces in Kandhamal which culminated in the massive human rights violations against Christians in August 2008 has pushed back the entire populace, both the dalit and adivasi Christians by 40 to 50 years economically. The dalits and adivasis of Kandhamal embraced Christianity with the sole aim to assert their humanity and put an end to caste discrimination, exclusion and exploitation. How far the Churches have been involved in annihilating caste and promoting dignity and political rights of the dalits, adivasis and other marginalised communities? Lack of commitment in ensuring equal rights for Dalit Christians and lack of seriousness in challenging the anti-conversion acts are clear examples to demonstrate the misplaced priorities of the Church in India. Ironically the first Freedom of Religion Act was enacted in Orissa in 1967. This act was against the secular fabric of our nation and the Constitution of India. Still there had been no major attempt to challenge this anti-constitutional law. Even when citizenship or constitutional rights were violated the Church took the perspective of religious persecution, politically becoming victim of its own processes. The blatant human rights violation against Meena in Kandhamal was not a mere injustice done to a religious sister. It was more than a suffering of a minority religious woman. It was a barbaric act against an adivasi woman. Unfortunately the Churches by projecting the entire episode as religious persecution succumbed to a politically incorrect position. Many secular women groups which showed initial interest later distanced themselves. In democracy, religious and minority rights are important particularly in a religiously and culturally diversified state to protect and promote the numerically and culturally marginalised communities. But these cannot be at the cost of asserting and promoting citizenship rights.

#### **D. Ensuring of participative and democratic culture**

Expansion of Human Rights Culture both within the Church structures and outside is a necessary step to reshape the social ministry of the Church. How far have the internal organisational structures of the Church imbibed the human rights culture within their organizational framework? The Church is also a victim of power politics. Rites, castes, gender, sometimes even the money and narrow group interests dominate the decision making structures. The poor do not have a space to voice out their views, and so they still remain objects of a developmental process. It is also important to recognise and acknowledge that the historical consciousness of the Church is built up on patriarchal culture. The voice of the poor, particularly of women is still feeble in the decision making structures of the Church. The Church has failed to express in action that the Church of the poor is a form of revolution vis-à-vis the old tradition-bound Christendom model of church. If only we allow the Church of the poor to show and direct us to where our impossible dream might be realised and where we shall come upon our unreachable star, we would radically transform our relationship with God, fellow human beings and cosmos.<sup>14</sup>

#### **E. Challenging institutionalised forms of discrimination**

Yet another major challenge for the Church is to move from addressing individual deprivation to institutional discriminations. The normal pedagogy of the Church in addressing poverty and resourcelessness revolves around strengthening the capacities of individuals or smaller groups. Victimization of an individual or a group is directly linked to institutional discrimination. But such structural injustice is not sufficiently emphasized. Despite a number of affirmative actions initiated by the state for the welfare and development of the poor, practically all such actions for them are made out to be failures. A sustainable empowerment process is not possible unless institutionalized forms of discrimination are sufficiently addressed. The Right to Information Act is a people's weapon to make the public institutions transparent and accountable. Rightly so we condemn these

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14 Julio X Labayan, *Revolutions and the Church of the Poor* (Claretian Publications, Philippines, 1995) 156 – 159.

institutions as corrupt, inefficient and exploitative. The social mission of the Church lies in building public pressure and making the public institutions to deliver good for the poor. The Church hesitates to exploit the Right to Information Act in favour of the poor as much as it could, fearing that it may not take long for the poor to apply the same philosophy towards the Church.

The institutional form of discrimination and deprivation reduced the dalits and adivasis and the downtrodden to a state of lesser being, non-being and being only for the wellbeing of the dominant castes and class. It is not simply non-literacy, poverty, malnutrition, ill-health that became the lot of the poor, but in the ultimate analysis they were reduced to resourcelessness, powerlessness and baselessness. Both the so called mainline intellectuals, academicians and administrators project non-literacy, ignorance and poverty as the evils that affect the dalit and adivasi communities. By doing this they totally sideline the real issues of redistribution of resources, progressive political participation, and equity in cultural and economic wealth.<sup>15</sup>

While the reservation policy, political reservation in various bodies, reservation in government services, admission to educational institutions and in several other areas, of the government has helped a miniscule of dalit and adivasi population, the non-implementation of various announced policies have deprived dalits and adivasis of their basic human rights. In the globalised era the shrinking public space and enlargement of the private space threatens even the minimum benefit the dalits had access to. In April 2007, the Jharkhand government returned Rs. 4700 crores back to the Central Government. This was the amount given by the Central government for the development of the poorer areas of the state. Jharkhand and Chattisgarh are two tribal states in India where livelihood options have radically shrunk forcing hundreds of tribal boys and girls to flee to various places as migrant labourers, often working under inhuman conditions. The Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in the 51<sup>st</sup> National Development Council Meeting held on 27.6.2005 has emphasized that "Special Component Plan and

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15 Prakash Louis, *Casteism is Horrendous than Racism* (New Delhi: Indian Social Institute, 2001).

Tribal Sub Plan should be an integral part of Annual Plans as well as Five Year Plans, making provisions therein for non-divertible and non-lapsable with the clear objective of bridging the gap in socio-economic conditions of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes within a period of 10 years". Millions of rupees allotted for the development of dalits both by the centre and state through Special Component Plan programme is returned back as unspent money and diverted for other purposes. Discrimination and exclusion seems to be the only characteristic of the dalits and adivasis. Along with engaging in some developmental works for the poor by raising its own financial resources the social mission of the Church has to take a new turn in terms of monitoring the implementation of the programmes of the State and by educating the people to access state resources.

#### **F. Promoting Ethical Market, Responsible State, Enlightened Civil Society**

Liberalization of the economy led to the gradual retreat of the state from the economic sector and subsequently to its commitment to build a welfare state. The state on its part towed the market line adhering to the conditions laid down by the WB, IMF, WTO and other international institutions as gospel truth. In response to internal emergency declared in 1975–77 a vigorous civil society emerged in India as a countervailing power to the state. But down the years the market interests have intruded into the civil society organisation and largely made them victims of consumerist culture. On the other hand the radical civil society organisations have been suppressed with iron hand by the various anti-people laws of the state.

The future depends on how all three main stake holders, market, state and civil society clearly articulate the reciprocity. The current ethos is one of shrinking state, expanding market and weakening civil society. However, this mood is against the very grain of human society because human beings are three-in-one entities. They are at once citizens, consumers and communitarians. Citizen is the creature of the state; one cannot meaningfully think of entitlements, duties and rights of citizens without reference to a state. Market produces consumers, much of their needs and aspirations are created and sustained by the market. Civil society prompts the emergence of communitarians, ideally



the communitarian spirit of interrogation is informed altruism. If the ongoing process gains momentum, we will enter a world torn asunder between the citizen, consumer and communitarian. And this should be arrested.<sup>16</sup> The Church has to critically evaluate its social mission and adopt new strategies to creatively deal with this conflict promoting common good and justice to last and the least.

### Conclusion

Commenting on Christianity Dr. B. R Ambedkar said, "Missionaries feel they have done their duty when they convert an untouchable to Christianity. They do not look after their political rights. I find this is a big fault in Christians, because they have not entered into politics up till now. It is difficult for any institution to survive without political support."<sup>17</sup> Socio-economic empowerment and political empowerment of the poor are two sides of the same coin. Politics is a matter of power and the Church's social mission would be measured by the quality of its political empowerment process of the poor and the marginalised and its strategic engagement for and with the poor in expanding and facilitating the progressive realisation of the citizenship rights. Will the Indian Church be ready to take up the challenges of our times to rediscover its social mission?

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16 T. K Oommen, *State, Market and Civil Society*, ed., Rajesh Gill (New Delhi: Rawat Publication, 2005) 31.

17 Taken from the speech delivered to Indian Christians of Sholapur by Dr. B R Ambedkar, published in 'Janata' of 5.2.1938.

# Becoming a “Church *of* the Poor” in India

Valle Vijaya Joji Babu

Taking stock of the myriad kinds of social service that the Indian church renders, anybody can rightly say that the church is obviously pro-poor. Joji Valle in this article argues that the Indian church functions only as the church for the poor; it has not yet become the church of the poor. He explicates the theological basis of the church of the poor. He then elucidates the breadth and width of this notion with the help of three prominent theologians, namely, Jon Sobrino, Aloysius Pieris, George M. Soares-Prabhu. Valle reflects further on the implications of a church of the poor in the Indian context. That includes ultimately the church becoming poor and the poor becoming the church. Such a church will become and function as a sister to the poor and the despised, rather than a generous neighbour.

The “option” of God for the poor is as old as the history of humanity. The engagement of the Church with the poor is as old as the history of the Church itself. The engagement of the Church in India with the poor of India is centuries old. The numerous Christian educational, medical and charitable institutions in India are the impressive signposts of the work of the Indian Church for the poor in India. Service of the Church to the poor in India is epitomised in the life and work of Mother Theresa. While there is no denying that the church in India has done great charity to the poor, one can yet perceive in the life and ministry of the church in India certain “uncomfortable distance” from the poor. It works for the poor, but it is not yet poor; it is for the poor, but not with the poor, nor of the poor. Church seems to live like a “neighbour”

to the poor. This article addresses such dilemma/lacuna of the Indian Church by an investigation of the ecclesiological concept of the "Church of the Poor" and suggests that the Church in India can become "fully Indian and authentically Christian"<sup>1</sup> only when it becomes truly a "Church of the Poor". The first part of the article will explore the concept of the "Church of the Poor" and the second part will make an attempt to read the implications of this ecclesiological concept for the Church in India.

### 1. Church of the Poor

The Second Vatican Council called for solidarity of the "people of God" with the people of the world (GS). Responding to this conciliar call, ecclesiology from a liberation theology perspective makes this "solidarity with the people of today" as the "solidarity with the poor and oppressed." A church which lives out this solidarity with the poor is the "Church of the Poor" and this ecclesiological notion is developed by liberation theology. The ecclesiological notion of the "Church of the Poor" goes much beyond the "option for the poor", commitment to the poor, caring and working for the development of the poor, to making the "poor" the "defining nucleus" of the life, the structure and the mission of the church. The "Church of the Poor" is not based on mere "sociological foundations", but is rooted in "Christological foundation". Christ who has made himself "the Poor One" and who mediates his salvation concretely through the poor of the world today is the foundation of the "Church of the Poor". FABC Office of Evangelization expresses it very succinctly: "The 'self-emptying' of the Son of God in Jesus Christ is the decisive theological reason why the Church must be a poor Church."<sup>2</sup> As Gustavo Gutiérrez, one of the founding proponents of such ecclesiology affirms: "In this ecclesiological approach, which takes up one of the central themes of the Bible, Christ is seen as the Poor One, identified with the oppressed and plundered of the world."<sup>3</sup>

1 I borrow this phrase from the title of a book on Amalorpavadass: J. A. G. Gerwin van Leewen, *Fully Indian – Authentically Christian* (Bangalore: NBCLC, 1990). I differ though from the path suggested in this book for the church in India to become "fully Indian and authentically Christian."

2 See "Conclusions of the Theological Consultation, FABC Office of Evangelization Hua Hin, 10th November 1991" in *Indian Missiological Review* 14:1 (1992), 71.

3 Gustavo Gutiérrez, "Theology from the Underside of History," in *The Power of the Poor in History* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1983), 211.

## 1.1. Some Theological Foundations of the “Church of the Poor”

### 1.1.1. Christological: Faithfulness to the “God of the Poor”

God of the Bible and the Christ of the Gospels is a “God of the Poor”. The famous Swiss theologian, Karl Barth puts very bluntly and convincingly this fact:

God always takes His stand unconditionally and passionately on this side and on this side alone (the threatened innocent, the oppressed poor, the widows, orphans and aliens): against the lofty and on behalf of the lowly; against those who already enjoy right and privilege and on behalf of those who are denied it and deprived of it.<sup>4</sup>

This “God of the Poor” opted for the poor all through the history of salvation, and the church opts for the poor in faithfulness to the “God of the Poor”. The option for the poor that the church makes “is not something marginal or added-on to the Christians; it is rather something central to the church’s mission, and is so because it is intimately linked to the very heart of God and so to the very centre of the revealed mystery of God”.<sup>5</sup> In other words, option for Christ is an option for the poor; option for the poor is integral to being Christian. Option for the poor “is not only a privileged criterion of Christian orthopraxis” but “it is, more fundamentally, a privileged criterion of orthodoxy itself”.<sup>6</sup> Thus, faithfulness to the “God of the Poor” would mean being a “Church of the Poor”. Can the “Body” of the “God of the Poor” be not a “Body of the Poor”; in other words, a “Church of the Poor”? Living as a “Church of the Poor” is the closest likeness the church can achieve of its founder and head who has revealed himself to be a “God of the Poor”. As *Lumen Gentium* very rightly says, the church “recognizes in the poor

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4 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/I (New York: Scribner’s, 1975), 386.

5 Jorge Pixley and Clodovis Boff, *The Bible, the Church and the Poor* (Kent: Burns & Oats, 1989), 113.

6 Roberto S. Goizueta, “Knowing the God of the Poor: The Preferential Option for the Poor”, in Joerg Rieger, ed., *Opting for the Margins: Postmodernity and Liberation in Christian Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 144.



and suffering the likeness of her poor and suffering Founder" (LG 8). In the compelling words of Gustavo Gutiérrez:

The church wishes to be faithful to the God of Jesus Christ, it must become aware of itself from underneath, from among the poor of this world, the exploited classes, despised ethnic groups, and marginalized cultures. It must descend into the hell of this world, into communion with the misery, injustice, struggles, and hopes of the wretched of the earth—for "of such is the kingdom of heaven" ... To be born, to be reborn, as church, from below, from among them, today means to die, in a concrete history of oppression and complicity with oppression.<sup>7</sup>

### 1.1.2. *Sacramental: The poor are the "Sacrament of God"*

Christ who was born poor became the sacrament of God's salvation to the world; his poverty is not incidental but an integral part of the mystery of incarnation. By incarnating as a "poor man" Christ is in the poor and makes the poor his mediators in the world, the sacrament of his grace. In this sacrament, we meet the God who is poor and who calls us to solidarity and justice.<sup>8</sup>

The Spirit of Jesus is in the poor and, with them as his point of departure, he re-creates the entire Church. If this truth is understood in all its depth and in an authentically Trinitarian perspective, it means that God advances indefectibly by way of the poor; that the Spirit of Jesus takes historical flesh in the poor; and that the poor show the direction of history that is in accord with God's plan.<sup>9</sup>

It was the poor around Christ who in their poverty were well disposed to listen and respond willingly and enthusiastically to the good news of the Gospel. As Sobrino states, "by their material and historical situation" the poor "are in the best position to understand what the Good News is about".<sup>10</sup> It is through the poor that Christ has inaugurated

7 Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The Power of the Poor in History*, 211.

8 Pixley and Boff, *The Bible, the Church and the Poor*, 112-114.

9 Jon Sobrino, *The True Church and the Poor*, 93.

10 Jon Sobrino, *The True Church and the Poor*, 94.

the kingdom of God in the world, and “the poor and the oppressed are the chief partners of God in God’s plan to usher in an Inclusive New Human Community of peace and justice” in every age.<sup>11</sup> Salvation of Christ is today mediated undeniably through the world of the poor and “this liberation can be achieved only in and through the *self-redemptive action of the masses*, the commoners, the hoi polloi, the poor, the oppressed, who are thought to be invested with a messianic mission for the total liberation of humankind”.<sup>12</sup>

### 1.1.3. Missiological: Liberation as the Mission of the Church

Church is missionary, and it is called always to evangelization. While in the past, evangelization/mission of the church was understood as making people members of the church, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* and *Redemptoris Missio* have broadened the concept of mission/evangelization much beyond preaching the Gospel. Evangelization thus is oriented not merely to the spiritual wellbeing, but also to the socio-economic uplift. Evangelization directs itself to the total and integral liberation of human beings.<sup>13</sup> According to John Paul II, while the mission of Jesus is “the proclamation and the establishment of the Kingdom of God”,<sup>14</sup> “building this Kingdom means working for liberation from evil in all its forms”.<sup>15</sup> The Synod of Bishops in 1971 reiterated: “Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel, or, in other words, the Church’s mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation.”<sup>16</sup> For Pieris, evangelization in Asia would mean evoking in the poor the liberative dimension of Asian religiousness. He calls for a mutual evangelization where the “*theologians are awakened into the*

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11 Dhayaanchand Carr, “The Poor God and the Poor of the World,” *Religion & Society* 51:2-3 (2006), 5-6.

12 Aloysius Pieris, SJ, *An Asian Theology of Liberation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), 118-119.

13 *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 9. See also no.30.

14 *Redemptoris Missio*, 13.

15 *Redemptoris Missio*, 15.

16 Synod of Bishops, 1971, *Justice in the World*, 6. See also nrs. 34, 35 and 38.

*liberative dimension of poverty and the poor are conscientized into the liberative potentialities of their religiousness*".<sup>17</sup> The Church must be sensitive to the aspirations, movements of the poor and the oppressed in the world; it must be in dialogue with the life-realities of the poor, and work for their authentic liberation; it needs to be in deep solidarity with the poor in their struggles and liberative action.

## 1.2. Some Perspectives on the "Church of the Poor"

### 1.2.1. Jon Sobrino: *The True Church as the "Church of the Poor"*

Sobrino, the prominent Jesuit liberation theologian, clearly indicates that the "Church *for* the Poor" is not the same as the "Church *of* the Poor." The "Church *for* the poor" is a church that does charity to the poor or assists the poor; it offers generous aid standing away from the poor.<sup>18</sup> In the Church *for* the Poor, "the poor would not yet constitute a historical principle for the configuration of the Church, even though they may very well be principal recipients of the mission of that Church".<sup>19</sup> The "true Church" for Sobrino is the "Church of the poor" that understands itself from among the poor.

We can highlight three basic features of the "church of the poor" that Sobrino proposes. Firstly, the poor are the centre of such church. The "Church of the poor" is "formed on the basis of the poor" and finds in the poor "the principle of its structure, organization, and mission". The poor are the "centre" and the "theological source" of the "Church of the poor", and "they give direction and meaning to everything that legitimately and necessarily constitutes the concrete Church"<sup>20</sup>. A church of the poor is "a Church that arises in solidarity with the poor, protests against their material poverty as being an expression of the world's sin, engages in a struggle against this poverty as a form of liberation, and allows itself to be affected by this poverty and its consequences as an expression of its own kenosis".<sup>21</sup>

17 Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, 41.

18 Jon Sobrino, *The True Church and the Poor*, 92.

19 Jon Sobrino, *The True Church and the Poor*, 135.

20 Jon Sobrino, *The True Church and the Poor*, 93-94.

21 Jon Sobrino, *The True Church and the Poor*, 94.

Secondly, “conversion” is the indispensable condition for both the recognition as well as the formation of the Church of the Poor: “without one’s subjective conversion one cannot grasp the objective goodness of this new reality”.<sup>22</sup> While the Church of the Poor calls for conversion, itself it becomes “the structural channel for conversion” as the poor readdress in every age the questions of God, his kingdom, love, justice and sin, and recall the ethical demands of Christianity. Conversion is understood as “turning towards the God of life” and it includes “the constant search for the concrete will of God.”<sup>23</sup> It demands an organisational change in the conception of the church from “centre to the periphery”, from “power to the poor”. In the words of Sobrino, “the entire Church should migrate to the periphery and share the powerlessness of the poor, at the feet of a crucified God.”<sup>24</sup>

Thirdly, the “Church of the Poor” for Sobrino is indeed the true church. The church of the poor has the closest conformity with Jesus and the church of the New Testament which lived in concrete solidarity with the poor;<sup>25</sup> “it reflects best the normative Church of the period when the faith began.”<sup>26</sup> Further, the church of the poor not only has the four marks of the true church –unity, holiness, apostolicity, and catholicity–, but also it makes these marks historically concrete.<sup>27</sup> For Sobrino, the poor are the “privileged channel of truth and grace” like the magisterium and sacraments. Through the Spirit present in the poor *ex opera operato*, the church of the poor is the “structural channel” through which the true church comes into being.<sup>28</sup>

### 1.2.2. Aloysius Pieris: Authentic Local Church as the “Church of the Poor”

Aloysius Pieris, Sri Lankan Jesuit theologian, grounds his theology of the local church (in Asia) on the poor of Asia and their religiousness. The *poor*, for him, is “the basic theme of any theology”, for “the story

22 Sobrino, *The True Church and the Poor*, 97.

23 Jon Sobrino, *The True Church and the Poor*, 144-148.

24 Jon Sobrino, *The True Church and the Poor*, 98.

25 Jon Sobrino, *The True Church and the Poor*, 89-90.

26 Jon Sobrino, *The True Church and the Poor*, 96.

27 Jon Sobrino, *The True Church and the Poor*, 100-124.

28 Jon Sobrino, *The True Church and the Poor*, 95.



of Jesus [is] pre-eminently the story of a God *of* the poor, a God *with* the poor, a God *for* the poor."<sup>29</sup> The poor are not merely the objects of our compassion, but are those "*through whom God shapes our history*".<sup>30</sup> Pieris understands the Bible as the "*religious experience of the poor*", the struggle of the poor in which God is an intimate partner",<sup>31</sup> and suggests the two biblical axioms as the pillars of a valid liberation theology in Asia: "the irreconcilable antagonism between *God and mammon* and the irrevocable covenant between *God and the Poor*".<sup>32</sup> And the *religiousness* (in Asia) cannot be reduced to the great religions of Asia; it includes the religiosity of the poor, the subaltern religions of Asia. "The *religiousness* of the poor and the *poverty* of the religious masses *together* constitute the complex structure of Asian reality that is the matrix of an Asian theology."<sup>33</sup>

The *poor* and their *religiousness*, Pieris argues, are the two indispensable realities which should be fruitfully and creatively blended in constructing any contextual theology in Asia. Such a theology generates an authentically local church. A *valid* theology in Asia, for Pieris, is liberation theology which is immersed in the struggles of the poor of Asia. The evolution of liberation theology in a local church eventually generates an authentically local church which is deeply rooted in the life and struggles of the local people for the *authentic* local church and *valid* liberation theology are "twins in the same womb of praxis".<sup>34</sup>

The genesis of liberation theology overlaps with the genesis of an authentically local church. That is to say, a liberation theology begins to be formulated only when a given Christian community begins to be drawn into a local people's struggles for *full humanity* and through that struggle begins to sink its roots into the life and culture of these people.<sup>35</sup>

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29 A. Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, 94.

30 A. Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, 122.

31 A. Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, 123.

32 A. Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, 120-121.

33 A. Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, 113.

34 A. Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, 112.

35 A. Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, 111.

Pieris feels that the “church *in* Asia” (in tune with our categories, we can say, “church *for* the poor”) has not still become the “church *of* Asia” (the church *of* the poor) because it remains a “rich church working *for* the poor” and not a “poor church working *with* the poor”.<sup>36</sup> Thus, an authentic local church in Asia is a “church of the poor” being poor, working with the poor, and struggling with the poor for liberation. Being poor or becoming poor are foundational for the church that Pieris envisions: the body of Christ comprises of “the poor by “option” who are *followers of Jesus* (Matt. 19:21), and the poor by “birth” who are the *proxies of Christ* (Matt. 25:31-46)”.<sup>37</sup>

### 1.2.3. George Soares-Prabhu: *Jesus-Community as the “Church of the Poor”*

George M. Soares-Prabhu, the late Indian Jesuit theologian, reflects on Jesus-Community as the Archetype of the church indicating the implications of such a paradigm for the church in India.<sup>38</sup> Jesus-Community is presented to us in the New Testament as a paradigm for the church,<sup>39</sup> and it is not only desirable, but also indispensable that church in every age remains faithful to the spirit of the Jesus-Community from which it originated. Even if the origin of the church is located in the post-Easter experience of Pentecost, the post-Easter church is not discontinuous with the Jesus-Community; it remains like a seed for the tree; post-Easter church originates and develops from the Jesus-Community. As Soares-Prabhu rightly suggests “there is a normativeness about the Jesus-Community, which the church today (or at any time) ignores at its peril.”<sup>40</sup>

36 A. Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, 36.

37 A. Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, 21.

38 George M. Soares-Prabhu, “Radical Beginnings: The Jesus Community as the Archetype of the Church,” in Francis X. D’Sa, ed., *Theology of Liberation: An Indian Biblical Perspective*. Collected Writings of Goerge M. Soares-Prabhu, S.J., Vol.4 (Pune: Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth, 2000), 136-149.

39 James P. Martin, “The Church in Mathew,” in James Luther Mays, ed., *Interpreting the Gospels* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981), 97-114, specially 107-109.

40 G. M. Soares-Prabhu, “Radical Beginnings: The Jesus Community,” 138.

For Soares-Prabhu the Jesus-Community consists of Jesus and his close followers. "The new and unique religious experience of God as unutterably intimate and close", as *abba*, which Jesus communicates to his followers forms the basis of the Jesus-Community which reaches out to all in "*universal and unconditional love*" transcending all barriers of caste, community and race.<sup>41</sup> This Jesus-Community was a community made up of the poor: Jesus made himself poor and his close followers were poor. Jesus not only identifies himself with the poor and the outcasts but himself becomes poor and outcast.<sup>42</sup> His ministry unfurls mostly in the poor country-side than rich urban centres. "With astonishing freedom and courage he stands up against the religious and social oppression of the poor."<sup>43</sup> His proclamation has an unchanging "privilege of the Poor"<sup>44</sup> and "ending of poverty [is] the ultimate goal of his mission."<sup>45</sup> Soares-Prabhu insists that the poor that Jesus addresses are the real "sociologically poor" and not the metaphorical or religiously poor.<sup>46</sup> The followers of Jesus are also poor like him and are outcasts. The non-poor followers of Jesus are very few and they are not "altogether comfortable in the Jesus movement".<sup>47</sup> As Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza would say, "the scum of Palestinian society... constituted the majority of Jesus' followers".<sup>48</sup> Thus, the Jesus-Community was indeed a "church of the poor."

## 2. Implications in India

### 2.1. Is Indian Church a "Church of the Poor"?

The Church in India has not even fully become the "Church for the

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41 George M. Soares-Prabhu, "Jesus and the Poor," in *Collected Writings of George M. Soares-Prabhu*, Vol.4, 181.

42 G.M. Soares-Prabhu, "Jesus and the Poor," 177.

43 G.M. Soares-Prabhu, "Jesus and the Poor," 179.

44 George M. Soares-Prabhu, "The Bible as Magna Carta of Movements for Liberation and Human Rights," in *Collected Writings of George M. Soares-Prabhu*, Vol.4, 82.

45 G.M. Soares-Prabhu, "Jesus and the Poor," 183.

46 G.M. Soares-Prabhu, "Jesus and the Poor," 184.

47 G.M. Soares-Prabhu, "Jesus and the Poor," 178.

48 Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 129.

Poor", and as such is far from becoming a "Church of the Poor". The Church in India has undoubtedly extended so much aid to the poor of India for decades. But today when one looks at the Indian church, it is not difficult for one to see that many educational and other charitable ministries of the church seem to be misplaced, and the commitment of the church to the poor becomes questionable.<sup>49</sup>

The Church in India is known by its numerous educational institutions, and education remains the primary and the most visible ministry of the church in India. Undoubtedly, church's services to the nation in the field of education are indeed magnanimous and valuable. But today, we cannot deny the "perennial and distressing void" in educational ministry of the church in India to the poor. The church in India runs numerous good educational institutions, lower and higher, that cater to the non-poor, mostly lower educational institutions which cater to the poor.<sup>50</sup> It is hard to find the poor in the "best" educational institutions of the church in India.<sup>51</sup> It is an irony that a Catholic educational institute that celebrates a century of service in India, does not have on record even 5% of poor Catholic students.<sup>52</sup> When a significant number of its

49 "Conclusions of the Theological Consultation, FABC Office of Evangelization Hua Hin, 10th November 1991" in *Indian Missiological Review* 14:1 (1992), 67. The final statement of this consultation says in no.19: "We question them [Catholic institutions in Asia] today in so far as they implicate us in an alignment with the rich and powerful... Now they often survive as competitive businesses." Emphasis added. See also Kucheria Pathil, *Trends in Indian Theology* (Bangalore: ATC, 2005), 118-119.

50 While noting that Church in India runs quality schools for the rich and ordinary schools for the poor, Baptist Menezes further indicates that such discriminate educational ministry of the church perpetuates structural injustice in society. Baptist Menezes, "Response of the Indian Church to Social Issues," *Indian Theological Studies* 28:3-4 (1991), 289.

51 Felix Wilfred, *Dalit Empowerment* (Bangalore: NBCLC, 2007), 152-155.

52 As per the statistics by All Indian Associations Forum for Christian Higher Education, there are only 27603 (7.8%) dalit students out of the total number of 3,53,683 students in Church-run colleges. S. Lourdasamy, *Towards Empowerment of Dalit Christians. Equal Rights to All Dalits* (Delhi: Centre for Dalit/Subaltern Studies, 2005), 27. We can further say that most of these 7.8% dalit students in Church-run colleges come from the better-off families



personnel are engaged in educational ministry that is dislocated from the poor and their welfare, it is not easy to say that it is a church *for* the poor.

Has the impressive educational ministry of the church benefitted the poor of India? The late dalit bishop of Andhra, Johannes Gorantla, thought that "the Catholic educational ministry has not much benefitted the Dalits" and that "in the last two decades most of the schools and colleges opened by the dioceses and especially by the religious congregations are of English medium, situated in the cities and towns, which are not affordable to the Dalits and other subalterns".<sup>53</sup> The church made the poor literate in India by giving them the basic education and it is a pioneer in such work in many parts of India, but it does not seem to have effected in them qualitative capabilities for better employment. As Felix Wilfred opines, while church's instrumentality in opening the opportunities for education for dalits/tribals in India who were earlier prevented from access to schools is commendable, such opportunities are mostly at the level of primary education as dalit Christians rarely have access to the Christian institutions of higher education.<sup>54</sup>

No doubt, the Church has many educational/charitable institutions for the poor, but these are undoubtedly neither the best of its institutes nor the most productive of its institutes. So, does not the Church in India give its "best fruits" to the rich but grant only token "discarded fruits" to the poor? While church's educational ministry to the rich takes them to places enabling them secure higher placements, its educational ministry to the poor seem to take them nowhere. So, does

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among dalits than the really poor dalits. A latest report of the World Bank says 48 of every 100 students in India pursuing secondary education never go beyond that level. See <http://ibnlive.in.com/news/school-shocker-48-pc-indians-dropout-early/102833-3.html?from=tn> (accessed 07.10.2009).

53 Bishop Johannes Gorantla and Anthoniraj Thumma, "Dalit Christians in the Third Millennium," in Thomas D'Sa, ed., *The Church in India in the Emerging Third Millennium* (Bangalore: NBCLC, 2005), 156, 157.

54 Wilfred, *Dalit Empowerment*, 155. Even though he does recognize some efforts to change that of late, he still suggests that Christian educational institutes need a "radical revision of their policies" which create opportunities for dalits/tribals.

not the church in India empower the rich with the “best knowledge” and share the “scrape knowledge” with the poor? But such discrimination in its educational ministry strikes at the very root of identity, as Felix Wilfred precisely indicates, any ecclesiastical institution that is not “seriously engaged for the higher education of the marginalised groups such as tribals and dalits” lose their “Christian identity and prophetism”.<sup>55</sup>

In India, not many dioceses (local churches) have stated educational policies that express their preferential option for the poor. Even if some regional bishops conferences in India have made some general policies in favour of the poor,<sup>56</sup> such policies have not materialized concretely in the dioceses, and the bishops conferences themselves seem just satisfied with making policies in favour of the poor (or they are forced to make such policies because of the demands of the social teaching of the universal church), but are not bothered to insure the successful implementation of these policies. Their rationale in making these policies seem to be guided by external force (of which they themselves seem unconvinced) than internal conviction for the welfare of the poor.

## 2.2. *How will “the church become poor” and “the poor become church”?*

How true Pieris sounds in the context of the Indian church when he says that the church in Asia is usually a rich church working for the poor! Is the church in India poor? Yes, most people are poor, but are the bishops, priests and religious in India poor? Most bishops, priests and religious in India enjoy a far comfortable and luxurious living than many poor of the communities they serve. It is true that bishops, priests and religious in India are engaged in working for the poor, but they

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55 Felix Wilfred, *The Sling of Utopia* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2005), 260. See also pp. 273-275 of the same book where he further elaborates the point.

56 For example: “Our institutional services must cater increasingly to the poor and there must be reservations both in admission and in employment for the Dalits and the Tribals” (CBCI Statement, Varanasi, March 21-28, 1998); “No Catholic child Dalit/Tribal or otherwise, should be deprived of quality education because of a lack of means” (CBCI Statement, 2006, 8.1). It is not hard for any Indian Catholic to see how grossly these statements/policies are ignored in praxis.

themselves are not poor. We are usually the rich working for the poor! But such a mode of ministering –being rich and working for the poor– is neither liberative nor salvific, neither for us nor for the poor we serve! We need the conversion of the bishops, priests, and religious of India, a conversion from being rich to being poor, a conversion from working *for* the poor to working *with* the poor, a conversion from being *for* the poor to being *of* the poor.

We need a radical change in our perspectives towards the poor. We always envision the poor as "objects of compassion" and as people who are always on the receiving end. We always are the givers. But we need to become receivers from the poor. We need to look at them not merely as people who need our help, but as a "liberative locus" where we can experience salvation. When we approach them as receivers, then we will become capable of hearing the voice of God spoken through the poor. As Pieris appropriately affirms:

It is not enough to consider the poor passively as the sacramental recipients of our ministry, as if their function in life were merely to help us, the rich, to save our souls by our retaining them as perpetual objects of our compassion. ... The poor must be seen as *those through whom God shapes our salvation history*.<sup>57</sup>

So how can the church in India become a "church of the poor"? It is *not* by running numerous educational and healthcare and charitable institutions through which the church dispenses charity to the poor; it is *not* by dispensing aid to the poor. The church becomes a "church of the poor" when the poor themselves become the church and the rich live in solidarity with the poor. We need to transform ourselves into the poor, so that we can in turn transform the poor. As Boff claims, "poverty can be cured by poverty".<sup>58</sup> When the bishops, priests and religious become poor, live in deep solidarity with the poor, share the struggles and plight of the poor, be deeply immersed in the lives of the poor, then the church becomes a "church of the poor". What is needed today is not the extensions and multiplications of the educational/healthcare/

57 A. Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, 122.

58 Leonardo Boff, "Pelos pobres e contra la pobreza," in *Convergencia* (May 1979), 232-237; as quoted in A. Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, 20.

charitable institutions of the church, but extension and multiplication of the efforts and willingness of the church to become poor. Until that happens, I wonder if one can call the church in India as an authentic local church!

### 2.3. *How will the “poor become theologians” and “theology become poor”?*

“The theologians are not (yet) poor; and the poor are not (yet) theologians!”<sup>59</sup> This is what Pieris calls the “Asian dilemma” and which is as well clearly also the “Indian dilemma”. India has numerous qualified theologians, but they are not poor; India has numerous poor, and they are not theologians. Most non-poor theologians of India do theology that is mostly unrelated to the world of the poor, and most poor non-theologians cannot theologize their world because they are not theologians.

This dilemma, as Pieris thinks, can be resolved only “in the grass root communities where the theologians and the poor become culturally reconciled through a process of mutual evangelization” where “*the theologians are awakened into the liberative dimension of poverty and the poor are conscientized into the liberative potentialities of their religiousness.*”<sup>60</sup> Concretely this would mean that the non-poor theologians of India have to become poor (become one with the poor so that their theology comes from the poor) and the poor have to be enabled to theologize from their world. Such reconciliation between the theologians and the poor happens only when the church in India becomes a “Church of the Poor”.

#### 2.3.1. *Theologians Listening to the Poor*

The non-poor theologians of India are focussed on what they can contribute theologically to the welfare of the poor. This is a poor conception of doing theology: the theologian ought to listen to the poor and be attentive to what the poor have to say.<sup>61</sup> Theologians while

59 A. Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, 41.

60 A. Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, 41.

61 X.D. Selvaraj suggests that church in India has to “sharpen her ears” so that she can hear the cries of the oppressed and become sensitive to their miseries. X. D. Selvaraj, “How Prophetic is the Church in India Today?” in Thomas



proclaiming that the poor are the voice of God, neglect actually to listen to the poor. Most of what theologians in India say about the poor comes from their alienated intellectual reflection and not from an engaged experience with the poor. If only theologians can listen to the poor, they would convert/transform themselves before they propose a theology for the conversion/transformation of the poor. As Sobrino succinctly puts it:

When the Church makes the decision and accepts the risk of listening to the voice of the poor, heeding their faith and hope, and accepting the fact that it must learn from their practice, then that will work the miracle that neither administrative rules nor sermons nor theologies can accomplish.<sup>62</sup>

When theologians in India can listen to "the voice of God in the poor", they will no more excuse themselves from doing theology of the poor; they will no more say "I do not do dalit theology because I am not a dalit", "I do not do tribal theology because I am not a tribal", or "I do not do Feminist Theology because I am not a woman".

### 2.3.2. *Can the non-dalit theologians of India not do Dalit Theology?*<sup>63</sup>

Dalit Theology in India has mostly been a non-Catholic engagement, it is done mostly by non-Catholic theologians in India. One can find here and there some reflections on dalits and dalit theology in the writings of Indian Catholic theologians, but it is neither their "preferentially opted theology" nor their "passionately engaged theology"; the hearts of the

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D'Sa, ed., *The Church in India in the Emerging Third Millennium* (Bangalore: NBCLC, 2005), 498.

62 Jon Sobrino, *The True Church and the Poor*, 103.

63 I absolutely do not undervalue Tribal and Feminist Theologies in India to Dalit Theology. I consider all three theologies equally important in India. I speak of Dalit Theology here only to make the argument simple and focussed so as to drive home the point of contention. While I say here "Dalit Theology" as that is the most visible and known, I would also mean the same for "Tribal Theology" and "Feminist Theology". Thus, the question can well be "Can the non-tribal theologians of India not do Tribal Theology?" and "Can the Men-theologians of India not do Feminist Theology?" And my arguments and proposals in this section for Dalit Theology hold good also for Tribal and Feminist Theologies.

majority of Catholic theologians in India clearly do not harmonize with the world of the poor. Dalit Theology has come (and still comes) mostly from non-Catholic theologians in India.<sup>64</sup> Why is that so? Why are the Catholic theologians in India not engaging in dalit theology? The answer to this question may simply be that the Catholic theologians of India are predominantly non-dalit and non-poor and as such are not opting to engage themselves with the world of the dalits and the poor. Like the Indian church that is willing to be a “church for the poor” but not a “church of the poor”, the non-poor Catholic theologians of India are willing to be “*theologians for the poor*” but not “*theologians of the poor*”.

Should only the dalits do dalit-theology? Some dalit theologians today argue that dalit theology can only be done by dalits as the dalit-experience is the foundation of dalit theology, which they claim non-dalits are incapable of experiencing and knowing.<sup>65</sup> But is this claim valid? While it is true that non-dalits do not experience the dalit-experience, it is not difficult to learn from dalits of their experience and get a feel of what they experience by living with them and sharing their lives and plight. I believe, for a theologian who lives in an academic institute, it may be hard to have dalit-experience, but for a theologian who opts to live in a poor dalit-colony or a slum, it wouldn't take a long time to begin feeling the reality of being poor or being dalit. The non-

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64 I am aware that there are some exceptions to this statement, but it cannot be denied that such exceptions are very few. George Soares-Prabhu with whose theology I have engaged in this article is clearly an example of an Indian Catholic theologian who engaged his theology very much with the world of the poor and dalits in India. Sebastian Kappen and Samuel Rayan could be cited as pioneers who engaged the poor very much in their theologies; others could be added to this list. There are other Catholic theologians in India who have similarly opted for a theology of the poor/dalits, but they are mostly themselves poor/dalits. The non-dalit Catholic theologians of India have mostly not engaged in dalit theology; the few who do engage, do it today more for the reason of making their theology relevant than for the want of making themselves “theologians of the poor.” It is hard to sense their “heart beating for the poor” in their theologies for the poor. Their theologies seem to betray their “unconvinced engagement” with the poor/dalits.

65 Aravind P. Nirmal, ed., *A Reader in Dalit Theology* (Madras: Gurukul, 1991), 47, 58-59, 140-142.

dalits can also enter the experience of the dalits when they immerse themselves fully in the lives of the dalits and become one with the dalits. The task of Indian theologian today demands him/her to enter into the world of dalit-experience and theologically reflect on such experience and its relevance/significance for the church and society. Has not the Son of God entered deeply into humanity, and become a human to redeem humanity? Following Jesus, theologians in India, need to become one with the dalits to theologically reflect on dalits, for as Samuel Rayan insists, "commitment to the oppressed and their struggle for freedom, justice and fellowship" are the first acts of theology.<sup>66</sup> Church for the poor, which is only interested in offering aid to the poor, can never enter the "dalit-experience" of the poor; but, a church of the poor will be immersed deeply in the "dalit-experience" as it is in deep solidarity with the struggles of the poor. So also, a *"theologian for the poor"* does not dare to become one with the poor and so he cannot baptize himself with the dalit-experience, whereas a *"theologian of the poor"* has already become poor and thus shares fully the plight of the poor.

### Conclusion: Exodus Pilgrims

Being/Becoming a "Church of the Poor" is not an end in itself; it is an "exodus pilgrimage" towards liberation. The end of such a mission, the destination of such a pilgrimage is the salvific liberation of the full humanity in Christ. In other words, the ultimate and total realization of the kingdom of God is the goal of the "Church of the Poor". The poor are the "new Moses" of the "new exodus"; the leaders who lead the "people of God" on a new and liberating journey through the desert of poverty, injustice, inequality and sin to the promised land of the kingdom. "God has chosen the crucified people as a vehicle of the Gospel and out of them God is building a new humanity."<sup>67</sup> The poor are the "chosen people", the "chosen Israel" who have already embarked on this "new exodus journey" and are already marching towards the kingdom through

66 Samuel Rayan, "Theological Priorities in India Today," in Virginia Fabella et al, ed., *Irruption of the Third World* (New York: Orbis, 1983), 30.

67 Daniel M. Bell, Jr., *Liberation Theology After the End of History: The Refusal to Cease Suffering* (London: Routledge, 2001), 168.

their “struggle for freedom” from poverty, injustice, inequality and sin: “Listen, my dear brothers, it was those who are poor according to the world that God chose, to be rich in faith and to be the heirs to the kingdom” (James 2:5). God calls everyone in the church and outside it to join the poor in the “new exodus journey”, so that all can attain liberation and realize the kingdom. By joining the poor on this exodus journey, we join God himself who is deeply involved in this journey, and he guides us to salvation. Joining the poor on this new exodus journey, we live our gift of faith, hope and charity, we live our call to follow Christ, we become the “Church of the Poor”. Christian spirituality is a community enterprise, as Gustavo Gutiérrez insists, “the passage of a people through the solitude and dangers of the desert, as it (community) carves out its own way in the following of Jesus Christ”<sup>68</sup>. Church in India becoming a “Church of the Poor” joining with the poor on the “new exodus journey”. In short, the Church in India needs to be a “sister” who is deeply bonded with the poor and shares fully their plight, rather than a “strange neighbour” who may extend some aid to the poor, but does not really share their plight. So the poor of India would say to the Church in India today: “Be my *sister*, not my *strange neighbour*”.

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68 Gustavo Gutiérrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells: The Spiritual Journey of a People* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1984), 137.



# Church for Religious Harmony

Subhash Anand

Religious harmony is undoubtedly a precious value in a society marked and sometimes marred by mutually competing religions. Subhash Anand in this article explores the role of the church in establishing and enhancing religious harmony, especially in the Indian context. He points to the deeper theological issues that usually surface in all inter-religious dialogue. Critically reviewing the present situation, the author offers some useful insights which can better equip the church in its ministry for social harmony. He suggests that the church has to become more Christian in the authentic sense of the term. What the church further needs is to become a more contextualized community, it has to support a more secular religiosity and its leadership has to become more effective. Otherwise, he fears, inter-religious dialogue will not reach to the grass root level, rather it will remain only in the scholarly world.

Our country is passing through a crisis. We experience different forms of communal tensions and even violence. Some political thinkers are of the opinion that all traditional religions tend to divide humanity, more so if they make exclusive claims such as, theirs is the only true religion; their holy book contains all the truth; their guru is the best and the last etc. On the other hand, if my perception is right, some theologians today think that the confession of Christ's unique and universal significance necessarily leads to a communal mentality that militates against integration.<sup>1</sup> If this claim is true, can we Catholics

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1 See for instance "Communalism discussed at theological seminar," *The New Leader*, January 17, 1988, p. 4.

still work for religious harmony? Hence the suggestion: we need to rethink the traditional claim.<sup>2</sup> I believe the problem is not with the uniqueness of Jesus. It is our failure to live out his uniqueness.<sup>3</sup> What causes social disharmony is the conflict of interests. The Church, with her inadequate theology and inauthentic praxis, is also responsible for communal tensions.<sup>4</sup>

### A More Christian Church

Speaking about the long-standing conflict between England and Ireland, a cynic remarked: "The English are good Anglicans, the Irish are good Catholics, but neither are good Christians!" At times I feel we Catholics in India are good Romans or Syrians, good Goans or Mangaloreans, good Tamilians or Kannadigas, good Reddys or Khammas, etc., but not good Christians, at least not sufficiently so. I am not talking of our personal weaknesses—we all have them. I am more concerned about a way of thinking and planning that is taken for granted, and that yet is far from what Jesus wanted for his Church. We need to constantly rediscover who and what Jesus Christ was, because whatever way we wish to serve our nation, we can only do so to the extent we are true witnesses of Jesus. The degree of our capacity to serve the world depends on the depth of our understanding of Jesus, on the intensity of our identification with him.

Jesus speaks of his mission in terms of service: he came not to be served, but to serve, and to lay down his life for many (Mk 10.45). Jesus is unique and universal because he is the servant of all. It is to impress upon his close friends this basic dimension of his life that he washes their feet, even though they call him teacher and Lord (Jn

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2 Commenting on Dominus Jesus, Josef Neuner remarks that though the tone may be harsh, we need "to recognize the serious concern of the Roman Congregation for the integrity of the Christian faith and to protect the Christian community against deviations. This may not always have been kept in mind in some critical comments." Josef NEUNER, "The Fullness of Revelation: Reflections on the Declaration Dominus Jesus", *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection*, 65 (2001), pp. 7-13, here p. 13.

3 Subhash ANAND, "The Theological Propriety of a Definitive Revelation", *Third Millennium*, 10-4 (Octo. - Dec., 2007), pp. 52-73, here pp. 70-71.

4 Subhash ANAND, *Hindutva: A Christian Response*, Indore: Satprakashn, 2001, pp. 87-107.

13.12-16). But this is something we are not easily prepared to accept. The beautiful symbolic gesture of Jesus did not strike his disciples at all: they were still quarrelling as to who was the greatest (Lk 22.24-27). Sad to say, these quarrels are not over. Reporting about a conflict in the Church in India some years back, one journalist remarked: "at stake are high ecclesiastical positions and personal ambitions of influential dignitaries."<sup>5</sup> Church leaders do not hesitate to invoke more mundane loyalties – caste, language, ethnicity, etc. – in their quest for power, very much like our politicians. Forces of social disruption operating in our country are also active within the Church. Whenever there is some conflict within the Church, it is largely the work of priests and bishops who are power-hungry. A Church that is divided within herself cannot be an instrument of harmony. I am convinced that if we with real humility present Jesus as the servant of all, irrespective of caste, creed, culture, etc. then this confession will not be communal, and nobody will have reason to suspect us.

The Kingdom of God was the centre of the life and proclamation of Jesus. I get a disturbing feeling: for most of us the Kingdom is not important, the Church is. Let me try to explain what I mean. The authorities are very concerned about numbers: greater the number, more the power. They claim that since Jesus is the Saviour of all, the more people know and accept him, the better for them. This may explain our mission *ad gentes*. We also believe that it is our brand of Christianity that is salvific. This explains why Catholic pastors have been quite disturbed by the fact that some Neo-Pentecostals are attracting Catholics away from their church. That this was a matter of grave concern for the Catholic bishops is clear from the fact "that the Doctrinal Commission of the CBCI and NBCLC, Bangalore, jointly commissioned a scientific study to investigate why more and more believers feel attracted to this movement."<sup>6</sup> Things do not stop here.

Many Catholics think it is their variety of Catholicism that is more salvific. This is one reason, *inter alia*, why Latin Bishops in the North resist the creation of Oriental dioceses in their region. Of course, there

5 P. Arvindakshan, *The Week*, September 13-19, 1987, p. 35.

6 Paul PARATHAZHAM, "The Challenge of Neo-Pentecostalism", *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection*, 61 (1997), pp. 307-20, here p. 307.

is the other reason: they will loose a substantial number of members. This is also the reason why the Catholic Church has an anti-conversion law: members of one rite cannot go over to another rite.<sup>7</sup> If the Kingdom of God were really our over-riding concern then what helps individuals most to be good humans – that is what the Kingdom of God is all about – would be the most important norm for us, and not codes of our own creation, not even the dogmas we have defined. Rigid codes and dogmatic creeds divide. Only when the Church makes quality of individuals her primary concern, will she be in a position to promote social harmony.

When religion is more a matter of preserving an institution, then social identity becomes important. We need to assert our collective identity. We do this through glamorous buildings, pompous celebrations, distinctive dress (including religious habit and liturgical vestments), noisy prayer-meeting, etc. “Decorations, construction, remodelling and renovation of over 50 catholic churches at a cost of Rs. 100 crores in the last five years has angered the Archdiocese [Trissur], which had directed the churches against it.”<sup>8</sup>

It is not for me to judge the motives of those responsible for this colossal waste, but this sort of behaviour is criminal. A vulgar display of worldly opulence and power – especially when a minority community is involved – is counterproductive: it distances people all the more. The questions others ask is: “If they can do it, why not we? If a puny mouse can wag its little tail, why should a lion sit helpless?” Some Christians believe that they should have distinctive names. Sometimes we may even think that, as a particular religious community, we have a socio-economic need – for instance, a housing colony – which we alone can take care of. The others will not only not help, they are positively hostile. We become exclusive. Naturally all this provokes social reaction, and leads to social tension. This tension is not always articulated, but it does tend to get accumulated, and then one day the bomb explodes.

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7 We do not seem to be aware of the hypocrisy of this situation. If we believe that Latin Catholics should remain Latin because they were born Latin, etc., then we should also concede that Hindus should remain Hindus because they were born Hindus, etc.



Social harmony will last only when it has a solid foundation: truth. When we are more concerned about an institution, the truth becomes a major casualty and history becomes a real problem. Institutions are shaped by great ideas, dreams and visions, but also by greed, lust, and ambition. When the latter forces become more powerful, then inducement, deception and even violence are used to secure the desired goals. Honesty demands that we own our past, however embarrassing it may be. Unfortunately "the Catholic Church seems to be endowed to an extraordinary degree with the truly remarkable ability to bury any historical evidence she finds troublesome and uncomfortable."<sup>9</sup> Today some fanatical groups want to re-write history by distorting facts and subverting the truth, so that the unpalatable past may be forgotten by posterity. Are we in any way better? Only when we humbly own our past will we have a meaningful future. Without truth there cannot be lasting peace. Without accepting our faults there is no reconciliation, no harmony. Truth alone can make us free, and without freedom harmony will be the quiet of the cemetery.

### **A More Contextualized Community**

To be instruments of harmony within a given context, we need to be very much part of that context. This is also one of the consequences of accepting the mystery of Incarnation: God works from within sinful humanity, from grassroots upwards. Moses, we are told, "used to take the tent and pitch it outside the camp, far off from the camp" (Ex 33.7). Jesus pitched his tent in our midst (Jn 1.14). By and large, our leaders are 'outside the camp', not really in touch with ground-realities, operational within the bounds of our institutions. There are different reasons for this, but one very important factor is the over-institutionalisation of the Church. As a result, a lot of our personnel, time, energy and money are invested in these institutions. Not much is left for the Kingdom of God. Of late, we are going in for more elitist institutions, and that will only widen our distance from the people at large.

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9 Luis M. BERMEHO, S.J., *Church, Conciliarity and Communion*, Anand (Gujarat): Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1990, p. 118. The author was forbidden by the Vatican to publish any theological writings. I am inclined to believe that the only reason was not his theological position, but also his struggle to unearth some very disturbing history of the recent past, and bringing it to the attention of his readers.

Culture provides much of the emotional environment needed for social harmony. The colonial dependence of some of the Christian missions brought about a social and cultural alienation among the first converts of these missions. Gandhi tells us that from his childhood he had a great respect for other religions, but he adds:

Only Christianity was at that time an exception. I developed a sort of dislike for it. And for a reason. In those days Christian missionaries used to stand in a corner near the high school and hold forth, pouring abuse on Hindus and their gods. I could not endure this. I must have stood there to hear them once only, but that was enough to dissuade me from repeating the experiment.

About the same time, I heard of a well known Hindu having been converted to Christianity. It was the talk of the town that, when he was baptised, he had to eat beef and drink liquor, that he also had to change his clothes, and that hence forth he began to go about in European costume including a hat. These things got on my nerves. Surely, thought I, a religion that compelled one to eat beef, drink liquor, and change one's clothes did not deserve the name. I also heard that the new convert had already begun abusing the religions of his ancestors, their customs and their country. All these things created in me a dislike for Christianity.<sup>10</sup>

These impressions of Gandhiji are not only the impressions of many Hindus but, because of his stature, Gandhiji's perceptions have shaped the subsequent attitude of many Hindus, as one perceptive writer states it:

Yet even though the particular circumstances that influenced Gandhi's dialogue with the Christians no longer prevail, the stereotypes of Christians and Christianity [referred to by Gandhi]... have affected the position of the Christian minority in independent India... The Christian community in India today has thus been encapsulated by its historic dialogue with Gandhi.<sup>11</sup>

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10 M. K. GANDHI, *The Story of My Experiments with Truth: An Autobiography*, Ahmedabad: Navajivan Pub. House, 14th rep. n.d., pp. 28-29.

11 J. C. B. WEBSTER, "Gandhi and the Christians: Dialogue in the Nationalist Era," in H. COWARD (ed.), *Hindu-Christian Dialogue: Perspectives and Encounters*, Maryknoll (NY): Orbis Bks., 1989, p. 95.

Even today Christians in some parts of India continue to be seen as alienated people, and their institutions, specially their schools and colleges, are considered to be centres of alienation.<sup>12</sup>

For some time now we have been pledging ourselves to adaptation, and then to inculturation. But we have just scratched the surface. We still have a long way to go. We need not merely translate our scriptural and liturgical texts, but also transcreate them, so that this land with all its natural beauty and variety becomes reflected in these texts.<sup>13</sup> We have to work towards “an inculturated theology, especially in the area of Christology”<sup>14</sup>, and in this process the narrative tradition of this land is to be reinterpreted to express the mystery of Jesus,<sup>15</sup> the philosophical tradition must be appropriated the way Thomas Aquinas appropriated Greek Philosophy. Our spiritual life needs to be nourished by personalizing the deep insights of Hindu mystics.

Popular or folk religiosity is a source of great social bonding. It tends to cross boundaries, because it is not guided by any dogmatic creed, rigid code or hardened ritual. Very often the core ‘story’ being celebrated is not religious in a sectarian form. It is the ritualization of some basic human need. It is time we not only take part in these celebrations, but also appropriate them, wherever the social context permits it. I say this because popular religiosity is intimately related to a cultural environment, which is partly constituted by the mode of

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12 At the Vishal Hindu Sammelan referred to in note 43, the former ruler of Gwalior, Rajmata Vijaya Raje Scindia “strongly condemned the blindfolded adherence of the Indians to go in for convent education and pride themselves in becoming proficient in English.” *Indian Express*, Pune, December 26, 1987.

That was over twenty years ago. Those who wish to malign Christians continue to make the same charge even today. At a recent meeting called by the Udaipur unit of the Hindu Vishva Parishad, an RSS spokes person said that conversion alone leads to alienation. See “Dharmântaa hi prerita karatâ hai râ trântaraa”, in *Dainika Bhâskara* (Udaipur ed.), 12th Sept. 2009, p. 10.

13 For a more comprehensive expression of this concern, see S. ANAND, “Inculturation in India: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow”, *Indian Missiological Review*, 19 (1997), pp. 19-34.

14 *Ecclesia in Asia*, no. 22.

15 *Ibid.*, no. 20.

production and geography. When these change, e.g., when we move from agriculture to industry, from village to city, popular religiosity may become irrelevant, even though the market mafia may still want to keep it going. Then we need to exercise cultural discernment and prophetic alienation.

Our continued dependence on foreign funds even for the ordinary needs of the Church minimizes our contextualization. The latter demands that we are in a position to take decisions in response to our needs, in dialogue with our context. But we do not always have the freedom for this. We cannot with credibility ask Rome to give us greater autonomy, for he who pays the piper tends to call the tune! The Vatican too does not appear to be willing to decentralize: power always tastes sweet, except to saints. Second, since the flow of these funds has to be cleared by the central government, we tend to keep quiet when the situation demands a prophetic critique. This was what happened during the Emergency. This deprives us of a very powerful *kairos*, a moment of grace, when we can witness to Jesus by siding with the oppressed close to us. Third, the ease with which foreign funds are available tends to alienate us, but particularly priests and religious, all the more from the hard realities of our context. We have a style of functioning that

needs evaluation. With our impressive buildings, organisational structures, lavish means of transport and ready availability of up-to-date technology (all of which would not be possible were we to depend on local funds) we give an impression of power and affluence. Are we deceiving the poor whom we intend to serve? Could we be perceived as a threat even by well meaning Hindus?<sup>16</sup>

I have a disturbing feeling: we, priests and religious, are distancing ourselves from the others, even from our own laity. They continue to be polite with us, but in real life we do not really matter. If they still come to us on special occasions, it may be to add a little social status

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16 E. DEGREZ, "Targeting the Minorities", *Jivan*, May-June 1999, p. 5. This is the consolidated report of the reflections within the Jesuit Conference of South-Asia.



and glamour to their functions – because in India ‘priests’ are still socially important. The evangelical commitment to poverty should have been a powerful source of social integration. In many instances it seems to be counterproductive.

To be an instrument of social harmony, a community needs to be very open. Sad to say, even today “the Christian community is by and large an introvert one.”<sup>17</sup> They tend to remain the ‘obscure marginals’.<sup>18</sup> When our personnel and institutions are attacked we begin to wake up and agitate, hence the questions:

Where were we, the official Church and the Christian community, when other minorities were under attack? Do we recall any official response or protest at the time of anti-Sikh riots of 1984, or when the Babri Masjid was demolished and Muslims slaughtered in Mumbai (1992-93)?<sup>19</sup>

Our struggle for the rights of the minorities and the marginalized must take us beyond our churches and make us cooperate with all people of good will – whatever be their caste, religion, language or gender. The problems of this land must be our problems.

In like manner, we need to be very sensitive when we invoke the minority rights granted by the Constitution. Theologically speaking, minority rights make sense when we are dealing with ethnic or linguistic minorities. When in the past I spoke in this vein, I was told that I was not realistic, or that I was an armchair theologian. Some even accuse me of belonging to the Sangh Parivar! But let us go back to our history. The first Christians were really a minority, that too in two senses. They were numerically a small group, and they belonged to the poorer section of their population. In fact, many were slaves. But the power of the Gospel was operative among them. It was only when Christians began to receive political patronage that slowly corruption set in. A community that seeks protection from the state forfeits its prophetic claim. Imagine Jesus seeking protection from Pontius Pilate!

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17 *Ibid.*, p. 6.

18 R. A. SCHERMERHORN, *Ethnic Plurality in India*, Tucson (Arizona): University of Arizona Press, 1978, p. 183.

19 DEGREGZ, “Targeting the Minorities”, p. 5.

The Christians accuse the BJP of being a communal party. Are we Christians free from the bane of communalism? In 1987, when on a tour of Kerala, Rajiv Gandhi, the then Prime Minister, invited the Catholic bishops to meet him and some did turn up for the meeting, while the others could not because they were informed late.<sup>20</sup> Fortunately this did invoke some critical reaction from at least some Christians of Kerala. Here is a sample:

It was highly improper on the part of the Prime Minister to have invited the bishops for a political discussion... and it was equally improper on the part of the bishops to have participated in the discussion in Kerala. The greatest malady of Indian politics is its gross contamination with religion and communalism... Our bishops, because of their immoral involvement in politics, are slowly losing their grip on the laity – specially the intellectual group...<sup>21</sup>

The BJP members do not hide their communal stand. We claim to be secular, but sometimes the reality is very much different. Just a few years back, a parliamentary election candidate addressed a meeting convoked by Christians and for Christians. Addressing the gathering the candidate told the audience that he had been educated in a Catholic school! This meeting was held in the hall of an institution which claims to be a leading Catholic theological centre in India!

### **A More Secular Religiosity**

To promote social harmony we need to be active within the larger society, and we do this in different ways. Social harmony is first and foremost a way of looking at life, and the praxis of values determined by this vision. Jesus was a great apostle of social harmony. In this context we, the Christians in India, need to ask ourselves: “Has our acceptance of the Gospel improved the quality of our life so as to enable us to be the salt of the earth, the light of the world? Do the Christians in India have greater moral integrity than others?” We surely

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20 “PM seeks Bishops’ Support”, *The New Leader*, 5 April 1987.

21 C. P. MATHEW, “Bishops & politics”, (Letter to the editor) *The Indian Express*, 24 March 1987.

have a lot of churches and shrines. Crowds attend novenas and flock to different pilgrim centres. There are so many prayer-groups, and many more are mushrooming as days go by. All this adds to our visibility, but does it improve the quality of our life? Let me make myself clear. Compared to other states of India, Kerala has a much larger Christian community. It is rich in priestly and religious 'vocations'. It has many 'Christian' schools and colleges. People give generously to their churches, and church feasts are celebrated on a grand scale. The Charismatic movement is very much alive there. The moot question is: Does Kerala have greater integrity in its public life? Do the Christians there think beyond caste and other discriminating boundaries? Similar questions can also be asked about Goa.

Some years back, I was discussing this problem with a friend of mine. He remarked: "We have been sacramentalized. We have yet to be evangelized?" It may help us to recall the claim of an unknown Christian writer of the second century.

For Christians are not distinguished from the rest of mankind either in locality or in speech or in customs... But while they dwell in cities of Greeks and barbarians as the lot of each is cast, and follow the native customs in dress and food and the other arrangements of life, yet the constitution of their own citizenship, which they set forth, is marvellous, and confessedly contradicts expectation... They obey the established laws, and they surpass the laws in their own lives. They love all men, and they are persecuted by all... In a word, what the soul is in a body, the Christians are in the world. The soul is spread through all the members of the body, and Christians through the diverse cities of the world. The soul hath its abode in the body, and yet it is not of the body. So Christians have their abode in the world, and yet they are not of the world. The soul which is invisible is guarded in the body which is visible: so Christians are recognised as being in the world, and yet their religion remaineth invisible.<sup>22</sup>

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22 accessed on 16-09-2009, from <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/diognetus-lightfoot.html>.

What distinguished a Christian community is not some external sign, definitely not an institution, but the integrity of character, and that is what makes for social harmony. They become the unseen leaven and the invisible salt.

Jesus was a secular person. He lived in the heart of the world, but his life was so different that he became a question mark to his companions. His spirituality was not the 'pietistic' type, but a commitment to human integrity, an integrity expressed in love for neighbour, truth and justice. He was not interested in constructing costly temples for his God or in conducting solemn liturgies in His honour, but in making human hearts the dwelling of his Abba and love of neighbour as the highest liturgy. This is also the challenge for the church in Asia and India.

There can be no true proclamation of the Gospel unless Christians also offer the witness of lives in harmony with the message they preach... This is certainly true in the Asian context, where people are more persuaded by holiness of life than by intellectual argument. The experience of faith and of the gifts of the Holy Spirit thus becomes the basis of all missionary work, in towns or villages, in schools or hospitals, among the handicapped, migrants or tribals, or in the pursuit of justice and human rights. *Every situation is an opportunity for Christians to show forth the power which the truth of Christ has become in their lives.*<sup>23</sup>

India needs the Gospel only if we Christians, by our life, help in promoting human integrity. Otherwise it will sound hollow. Ours must be a secular spirituality: a world-transforming vision and way of life.

Earlier I mentioned how the Church is burdened with its institutions. There is a brighter side to this. Our institutions give us a lot space. Our spacious churches, halls, play grounds, etc., can be made available to people of good will in so many different ways. Here are a few instances. Poor children sit and study under street lights, and play in narrow streets. Poor families spend a lot of money hiring a hall for the

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23 *Ecclesia in Asia*, no. 42. Emphasis added.



wedding of their children. Poor pilgrims, even the womenfolk, sleep, bathe and answer nature's calls in the open. In times of natural calamities the poor are the most affected people. Can we reach out to them? When there are distress situations that call for help in terms of resources and personnel, we tend to go our way: make our collections, organize our volunteers, etc. Can we join hands with peoples of other faith traditions? The spirit of diakonia will lead the Church to cooperate with all persons of good will. This was strongly recommended already in 1968, during the All-India Seminar: *Church in India Today*.<sup>24</sup> I am afraid we have not made much headway in this direction. This is not only because we do not trust people of other faith traditions enough, but also because we prefer to run our own show, because our institutions give us prestige and power. One of the best ways of bringing people together is by bringing them to work for the nation as a team. This will be dialogue in action.

### A More Effective Leadership

If the Church is to be a better instrument of social harmony, then she needs leaders who are intellectually more competent and spiritually more inspiring. I am afraid on both counts we are falling far below the level of expectations. Ours is an enlightened society. "Many lay people are now well educated and we bishops and priests feel inadequate to dialogue with them and much less to work with them as equals."<sup>25</sup> "The problem is compounded by the inferiority complex of many young priests who feel that they are less qualified and equipped than many of the parishioners."<sup>26</sup> I have noticed that when members of the hierarchy suffer from a sense of inadequacy, they tend to be dogmatic and authoritarian. This sort of behaviour is still condoned by most of our laity, and so our churchmen are comfortable within the boundaries of the institutional church. To animate social harmony we will need people

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24 All India Seminar: *Church in India Today*, Bangalore, 1969, New Delhi: CBCI Centre n. d., p. 260.

25. Opinions voiced during a CCBI Laity Commission group meeting during the CCBI Plenary Assembly, Ranchi, 4-8 March 2005, CCBI News, 16/1 (March 2005), p. 254.

26. P. T. Kuriakose, "Credibility of the Church in Kerala", *Satyahadeepam* (Eng. edition), May 16-31, 2005, p. 11.

who are comfortable as persons out in the market place, not as people who need the support of their position, the protection of their walls.

Also as spiritual leaders we find acceptance mostly within the Church, that too as persons who perform rituals which still have some social function.

The majority of the laity in the Catholic Church has taken a safe distance from the clergy and has become more indifferent to what happens within the Church... They have bitter experience with their Pastors who still hold the Sacraments as means of controlling and compelling the people to come to the Church and participate in its activities financially.<sup>27</sup>

More and more people, particularly the educated, are being disenchanted by our sacramental ministry (and this may well be a blessing). If we do not take serious steps to remedy the situation, we will soon be relegated to a museum.

Inter-religious dialogue not merely among scholars, but much more at the grassroots level – working together, sharing life, etc, is a very important means to promote social harmony.<sup>28</sup> Hence it is very sad to

27. Interview Fr. R. V. Mathias (earlier secretary, CCBI Laity Commission, now Rector, Christ Hall Seminary, Karumathur, Tamilnadu), CCBI News, 16/1 (March 2005), pp. 255-59, here p. 256.

28. Let me just report two examples of grassroots dialogue. If we want, we can have inter-religious youth groups. I wish to mention here the wonderful work being done in Pune by Fr. Cyril Desbruslais, SJ, with his youth group SSU (Searching and Service in Unity) founded in 1971. Searching is the inward-looking goal of the group: to help young people in their search for God, friends, meaning in life or whatever they are searching for. Service is the outward-looking goal of the group: to serve others less fortunate than themselves. Finally, to celebrate (not sweep under the carpet) what makes the members different (religions, culture etc) and celebrate the Unity that grows out of this diversity.

Right now (2009), there are about 50 active members, with about another 20 on the fringe. Of these some 35 active (and 10 'fringe') members are students, the rest being workers or student-workers (earning to pay for their studies). There are 18 Muslims, 23 Hindus, 2 Parsis and the rest are, at least nominally, Christians (Catholic and Protestant). The youngest is 16, the oldest is 28.

note that, exceptions apart, “the need for interreligious dialogue is not generally well appreciated nor supported on ground by church members...”<sup>29</sup> There are different reasons for this. Inter-religious dialogue is not a ‘cash-crop’. It does not bring in money, power, and prestige. On the contrary, as my experience shows, it can be a very thankless task.<sup>30</sup> Also inter-religious dialogue calls for a lot of self-confidence, and this is not possible without adequate intellectual competence and personal credibility. Thus a renewal of the Church, but above all of her leaders, is imperative if the Church is to effectively serve as leaven in the society at large.

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Within group activities include the Sunday ‘Krazy Games’ (just fun and a sing-song), Thursday formation sessions (group dynamics, personality development, etc.), monthly inter-religious prayer service, animated by the members. The members celebrate, among themselves, all the major religious festivals of the members.

Outreach activities include social work with street kids, with sex workers and their kids, aids patients, and so on. The group puts up an annual play to raise funds for their training and out-reach programmes. I am grateful to Fr. Cyril Desbruslais for supplying me this information.

In some parts of Maharashtra the Jesuits have watershed programmes involving the people of the village irrespective of religion. If we use our imagination we can do much more.

- 29 Anthony O’Mahony & Peter Bowe, OSB (eds.), *Catholics in Interreligious Dialogue: Monasticism, Theology and Spirituality*, Herefordshire: Gracewing, 2006, p. 15.
- 30 Inter-religious dialogue practised in a non-formal manner, through the promotion of one-to-one contacts between peoples of different religious communities, can be a source of great joy.

# **The Indian Church and the Sphere of Politics**

**P.T.Mathew**

The church's engaging politics has suspiciously been looked by many in India. Politicians detest any such move from the part of the church; and church members often go divided in their opinion about this hot issue. P.T. Mathew in this article suggests with valid reasons politics as one of the vital areas which call for the church's greater and sagacious intervention. He makes a brief review of the ways in which the church made its presence known in Indian politics in the past. Looking ahead he argues that the church cannot be indifferent to political decisions and arrangements which have far-reaching and lasting impact on the people to whom Christ came to give life. He offers some creative pointers to the political ministry of the church. He claims that the church can function in areas such as ministry of healing and reconciliation, advocacy on behalf of the excluded, dialogue with the political establishments, education for political ministry and judicious use of pastoral letters.

## **1.Introduction**

Christian contributions to education, health care, social service, etc. are favourite themes for commemorative volumes and seminar discussions. The Jubilee Year 2000 was one such occasion taking stock of the period since Indian Independence. However, contribution of Christians to politics is conspicuous by absence in most of these collections. It is not surprising given the ambivalence in church life in relation to politics. On the one hand politics remained anathema; on the other, the church authorities have been deeply immersed in politics,



though rarely acknowledged. This dilemma would explain the relative silence on Christian contribution to politics.

The Church, for long, defined itself as a spiritual body concerned primarily with the care of its own faithful, and hence to be kept away from the 'dirty field' of politics. The term politics is better understood today as an all-encompassing aspect of life in common destined to take care of public concerns and the well being of each one in a world of scarce resources and limited capabilities. The Church too realises that it exists within a political society, not apart from it, and is subject to the political dynamics of that society. No individual or institution can opt out of these political structures and processes. Understood thus the church has always been a political body and Christians have always been contributing to the political field, though rarely articulated consciously.

Two methodological problems need to be clarified at the outset. The first is the fact of historical delimitation. Christian contribution cannot be restricted to post Vatican II period or to the post-independent period; the Indian Church, from the first centuries of the CE, has been existing and interacting with the political regimes of each period. But paucity of data forces us to restrict our inquiry to recent history.

The second refers to the conception of politics in a democratic nation-state which is built on the notion of the individual as a citizen of rights and duties, where the vote of every person bears the same value. Collectivities and communities hardly count. Will it be then proper to speak of 'contribution of Christians' as a community? However, it is acknowledged that the Indian mould of democracy absorbs collective identities of caste and religion and ethnicity to a good measure. This fact leaves ample space for our inquiry.

This paper is an attempt at examining this phenomenon, not with an eye to evaluate the past, rather to streamline the path ahead in the socio-political context of the country. The first part will make a brief survey of the contribution made by the Christian communities in the political realm in the recent decades. In the second part we explore how Christians can engage themselves more effectively in the political field in the future.

Politics is generally understood as public activity associated with the conduct and management of the affairs of the community (as different from private concerns). It is based on Aristotle's belief that it is only within a political community that human beings can live the good life. The nation-state is a modern form of political organisation and an autonomous political entity based on citizenship and nationality. We need to be aware of the two senses in which the term politics is used, the broad sense which refers to the dynamic organization of society towards the common good, and the narrow sense which refers to activities carried out by persons, groups or parties in order to attain and preserve the power of governing in a given society (party politics). "If politics is the way of organizing man's secular life in view of the common good, political life is not to be the preserve of a few power-hungry politicians and vested interests behind them, but the concern of all who are devoted to that common good."<sup>1</sup>

## 2. Looking back

During the colonial era the Indian Christians had the tendency to identify themselves with the western missionaries and the British regime, and hence were viewed with suspicion in an atmosphere of nationalist fervour. The mass conversion movements had a strong influence in crafting the political attitude of Christians in general. "The enthusiasm of the new converts for their new creed invariably prompted them to take a pro-British posture, as the colonial masters were not only perceived as co-religionists but also as protectors of the Christian faith and Christian interests, notwithstanding the British policy of 'neutrality' in this context", writes Oommen and Mabry.<sup>2</sup>

Some try to portray the long struggle of the St. Thomas Christians for autonomy after the arrival of the Portuguese as a form of nationalist struggle. But it obviously lacked "a conscious link with the national awakening of the 19<sup>th</sup> century", notes Mundadan the historian.<sup>3</sup> These

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- 1 Vimal Tirimanna (ed.), *Sprouts of Theology from the Asian Soil* (Collection of TAC and OTC Documents 1987-2007), Bangalore: Claretian Publication, 2007, 76.
  - 2 T.K. Oommen and Hunter P. Mabry, *The Christian Clergy in India – Vol. 1*, New Delhi: Sage, 2000, 53.
  - 3 A.M.Mundadan, *Indian Christians –Search for Identity and struggle for Autonomy*, Bangalore: Dharmaram, 2003, 194.

struggles remained mostly intra-ecclesial in nature, and so can hardly be counted as political engagement. We see significant Christian presence in the freedom movement against the colonial rule. Foreign missionaries like C.F. Andrews and E. Stanley Jones were close associates of Gandhi, and many of them joined him in the Civil Disobedience Movement and courted arrest and went to jail. A Nationalist Christian Party too was formed to fight for independence. Many Christian names appear with prominence in the early history of the Indian National Congress, the main instrument of political nationalism. Kali Charan Banerjee (1847-1907) played a key role in the formulation of the Congress policy on core issues. Pandita Ramabai Saraswati (1858-1922), a pioneering champion of the emancipation of Indian women, was one of the first Indians who advocated the right of women to participate in national politics. Brahmabandhab Upadhyay (1861-1907) became active in the Swadeshi Movement, and popularised the politics of nationalism through *Sandhya*, a Bengali journal edited by him, and finally died a martyr accused of sedition by the British.

“Christian contribution to political life including the freedom struggle is often downplayed”, writes Babu Paul IAS.<sup>4</sup> In the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the political contribution of Christians got skewed, he adds. The self understanding of the Christian community in independent India was not smooth. “During the period of the Freedom Movement, the Christian community went through a conflict within itself between two opposing self-definitions. One: a closed religious community. Two: an open community which participated in the inclusive secular civil society.”<sup>5</sup> The leaders of the time were enlightened enough to opt for the second. The Minority Advisory Committee of the Constituent Assembly proposed the constitutional provision of reserved representation for Indian Christians in proportion to their population. But Christian leaders like H.C. Mookherjee, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur and Fr. Jerome D’Souza rejected the proposal, thus helping to mould

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4 Babu Paul, “Christians of Kerala in the 20th Century”, in *Tanima*, Vol. 17, no. 1 (2009), 10.

5 George Thomas, “The Christians and the Freedom Movement”, in *Indian Christian Directory for the New Millennium*, Kottayam: Rashtra Deepika, 2000, 65.

the self-image of the Christian community as part of the national civil society.

K.M. Mathew narrates in detail the Christian participation in the freedom struggle focussing on the princely state of Travancore since “the only State in India where Christians, a very small minority, can exert some influence in the public life was Travancore alone.”<sup>6</sup> Bold ventures like the *Malayali Memorial* of 1891 (struggle for social political rights, especially jobs in the Civil Service), and the *Abstention Movement* of 1933 (against discriminatory Legislative Reforms Act) were political in nature, and paved the way for a democratic system of government in the State of Travancore. Names of T.M. Varghese, A.J. John, Accamma Cherian and Anne Mascarene are closely linked with the pro-democracy movement in the State. The inscription on the tombstone erected by the government inside San Thome Cathedral at Mylapore, is self-explanatory: “A.J. John (1893-1957), member, State Assembly for 25 years, was in the vanguard of the struggle for freedom. Elected speaker of the Legislative Assembly – served as Minister and Chief Minister of Travancore-Cochin 1948-56.”

Christians continue to play important role in contemporary political life of the country. Their composition of the present UPA ministry in the Central government is a good indication. Earlier, the Liberation Struggle that brought down the communist ministry in Kerala in 1959 bears testimony to Church’s political power to resist state policies it could not agree with. 1980s saw the Church spearheading the fishermen’s agitation under a trade union banner. The story goes on in diverse ways in different parts of the country.

The Church in India Today Seminar in 1969 observes that even though the Christian community has made significant contribution in the spiritual, educational, social and humanitarian fields, a comparable degree of participation in the Civic and political life is lacking. It urges Christians as citizens of India, to mobilise its resources to awaken the political consciousness of the community and “to enter wholeheartedly

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6 Pala K.M.Mathew, “The role of Christians in India’s freedom struggle”, in Christian Contribution to Nation Building, op.cit., 30 (quoting C.Narayana Pillai).



into the mainstream of public life".<sup>7</sup> This insight that emerged 4 decades ago does not seem to have been followed up adequately.

### 3. Factors that Inhibit Christians' Participation in Politics

#### 1) *The deeply ingrained minority complex*

Numerically the Christian community is an insignificant minority in the country with less than 2.5% of the population, and remains scattered geographically and denominationally. Nearly 90% of them are drawn from three pockets, viz., the Southern States with Kerala and Goa contributing the lion's share, the North Eastern States, and the tribal belt of Chotanagpur, and so remained outside the political mainstream. A good portion of them came from subaltern groups with little political tradition to boast of. The conscious rejection of separate electorate for Christians at the framing of the constitution, and the consistent stand against forming a Christian political party, did contribute to a situation of political insignificance. The overriding feeling that we are only a little flock seems to have deeply affected the Christian psyche. Instances of state denial of legitimate rights of the community, or sporadic attacks on Christians by communal forces add to intensify the minority feeling. The tendency to respond to these by invoking 'minority rights' rather than 'human rights' pushes the community further into the trap of minority complex, making it incapable of playing its wider political role as citizens of the country.

The fear of appropriation by hegemonic majority religions is embedded in the collective psyche of every minority religious community. This fear cannot be explained away in mere rational terms. Appropriation refers to the wholehearted acceptance and assimilation of the faith articulations, religious symbols and sacred figures of another religion into one's own religious frame and sacred pantheon. It may appear a magnanimous gesture of recognition of the other, but in reality it can imply the annihilation of other religions into non-existence, instilling a fear in their followers. Vedic Hinduism has an inherent capacity to easily absorb alien religions, and it naturally instils fear in other religious traditions, especially the minority ones. The fear is increased when the

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7 Church in India Today – All India Seminar 1969, New Delhi: CBCI Centre, 1969, 370.

Hindu nationalists (advocates of *Hindutva*) ask minority communities to renounce their cultural identity and to conform. It is this fear of assimilation that forces minorities to seek shelter under 'minority rights', or in extreme cases, under religious fundamentalism or fanaticism.

The church seems to be unaware of the enormous moral power at its disposal to become leaven or salt for the transformation of the political sphere.

## 2) *Weight of the institutional presence*

The institutional presence of Christians at the national level in fields like education, health care and social service is far disproportionate to their numerical strength. Maintenance of the institutional character of Church's presence and apostolic ventures often requires the good pleasure of the rulers. This awareness forces the Church often to resort to diplomatic silence except when its institutional interests are directly threatened. The fearful silence before instances of public injustice or violation of human rights often presents the Church as tolerant of evil or an accomplice. It is thus forced to wear an 'a-political' garb in public. This stands in contrast to the demands of Vatican II that the institutional Church remain open to the socio-political realities.<sup>8</sup>

## 3) *Political illiteracy of the clergy and the religious*

Basic political education is still lacking in our seminaries and formation houses that still remain mostly secluded from the toils and struggles of everyday life. The outdated curriculum hardly equips them to deal confidently with political forces, or to guide the faithful to engage in responsible politics.

Vatican II has rightly highlighted the role of the laity in working for the renewal of the temporal order including the institutions of the political community. It affirms that Catholics versed in politics should not decline to enter public life, since it provides opportunity to work for the common good and the Gospel.<sup>9</sup> Recent church documents further specify that direct political involvement is the duty of the laity vis-à-vis the clergy.

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8 GS 76, LG 8

9 AA, nos. 7, 14.

Experience shows that the church either fails to promote the laity for effective participation in politics, or alienates those lay persons who get into party politics actively. The framework of Christian analysis of the socio-political realities to guide Christian politicians remains a mirage.

#### 4) *The confused political role of the hierarchy*

The political role of the hierarchy often presents a very confusing picture, and deserves urgent introspection. In today's aggressive media culture expressions of public opinion on controversial political issues are in high demand, and channels seek out contrasting opinions to sensationalise issues. Isolated bishops or priests are often trapped into it, and their words are presented as solemn statements of the Christian community. Adequate structures incorporating lay competence to formulate and present learned Christian positions on critical political issues are lacking. The merging of the spiritual, ecclesiastical and political leadership of the community in the person of the bishop/hierarchy is detrimental to cultivating proper political leadership in the community.

*Deus Caritas Est*, the first encyclical letter of pope Benedict XVI, reflects seriously on this thorny issue of Church's role in the political sphere. Acknowledging that the just ordering of society and State is a central responsibility of politics, it presents the role of the Church as helping to "form consciences in political life and to stimulate greater insight into the authentic requirements of justice as well as greater readiness to act accordingly". Building a just social and civil order is a political task, which is not the Church's immediate responsibility. "She cannot and must not replace the State." This, in no way, reduces the responsibility of the Church, for "she has to reawaken the spiritual energy without which justice, which always demands sacrifice, cannot prevail and prosper." This is done "through the purification of reason and through ethical formation".<sup>10</sup> Much work is required to convert these principles into action plans in concrete contexts.

#### 4. Looking Ahead: Political Ministry in the Making

Politics is still seen by the church as the murky field of corruption, casteism, criminalisation and opportunism, and hence to be shunned.

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10 Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 2005, no. 28.

Is it not part of Christian mission to help purify politics by engaging responsibly in the political process? The time has come to develop this responsibility as a new ministry of the Church - the *political ministry*. A recent article highlights the importance of the political ministry as the need of the hour, and laments that the Church has not grasped the crucial importance of political empowerment as key to progress, especially of the subaltern groups<sup>11</sup>. "The need of the hour is the political ministry. Church has neglected this ministry too long ... Hence the political dimension of the mission of the Church is an urgent task. It calls for the exercise of prophetic model of ministry, which denounces the injustices and evils of the rulers and the powerful, and announces the hope of God's Reign and its liberation."<sup>12</sup>

The FABC is unambiguous on this matter:

Since the Church must concern itself with concrete human beings and communities, it cannot be unconcerned with politics. This mission does not allow the Church to be uninvolved in the organizations of society towards the common good, which should be the task of politics. It cannot be indifferent to political decisions and arrangements which have such a far-reaching and lasting impact on the people to whom Christ came to give life. The Church as a community of Christ's disciples must become more and more politically conscious in order to infuse more life and grace into human and societal life... The Church needs to enter the political field, not to gain temporal advantage, but to be a servant ready to make its unique contribution, together with others, to a wounded humanity that needs the service of healing and promotion of life.<sup>13</sup>

The FABC again states emphatically:

If the Church must be involved in human beings in their concrete historical reality and temporal dimensions, it cannot avoid involvement in political concerns and questions which pervade,

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11 Bp. Johannes Goranthla and Antonyraj Thumma, "Dalit Christians in the Third Millennium", in *The Church in India in the Emerging Third Millennium*, ed. by Thomas D'Sa, Bangalore: NBCLC, 2005, 142ff.

12 Goranthla and Thumma, 157-58.

13 Tirimanna, op.cit., 70.



influence and sometimes dominate the temporal life of people and affect deeply their salvation. Politics is an inescapable concern of the Church. There is thus need for the Church to involve itself with political concerns.<sup>14</sup>

### a) *Presuppositions*

Church's ministry in the political realm presupposes four things as explained below.

i) *Church's self understanding as a political community*: There has been an inherent struggle in the church to theologically situate itself as belonging to the community of faith, on the one hand, and to the political community, on the other. Initially the State was seen as merely providing the 'locus' for the church in its spiritual mission. The priority was on the social order over claims of justice and rights. Gradually the State came to be understood as the provider and guarantor of conditions necessary to ensure justice and wellbeing. It was a transition from the notion of an individual to that of a person with political rights and responsibilities. The multi-religious, multi-ethnic nature of Indian society forces the Indian church to define itself in broader terms as a political entity operating within the reality called the State.

ii) *Church's engagement in political affairs as integral to its mission*: Church's emphasis has always been on the individual, trying to educate and uplift leading to conversion and commitment. In this process it failed to take note of the collective/political dimension of the society in which the individual exists. Should the church refrain from commenting on current political issues that affect the lives of people? "No politics from the pulpit" is a refrain often heard, especially in times of elections. The fact is that the church need not be and cannot be apologetic about its involvement in politics. The Christian community has to deepen its conviction that political ministry is an integral part of the church's task of witnessing to the Gospel in concrete socio-political situations. The term 'ministry' is important to ensure that it is a faith-based enterprise.<sup>15</sup>

14 Tirimanna, op.cit. 85.

15 GS. 39.

iii) *Acknowledging the political link of social ministry*: The social ministry of the church has gone through many transformations over the past few decades – from charitable activities through development programmes and interventions of a socio-political nature. Problems of poverty and illiteracy, homelessness and discrimination have come to be seen as resulting from institutional and structural defects that call for reform of the society rather than of the individual. Here social engagement takes the form of socio-political intervention aimed at changes in societal structures and policies. The agency gets transferred to the affected people; their empowerment and capability enhancement makes them participants in decisions that affect them. It may take the form of collective action or struggles against injustice or popular movements that brings better bargaining power to the affected people. Dalit movements, women's movements, movements for human rights and environmental rights, empowerment through Self Help Groups, etc. thus have come within the purview of church's socio-political action. *Caritas in Veritate*, the recent encyclical of Pope Benedict XVI, insightfully points to the *political path* in the practice of charity (no.7).

iv) *The complementary nature of political ministry*: Political ministry is not just another form of ministry; rather it is a complementary aspect of every ministry, and enables every ministry to become conscious of the political roots and implications of each ministerial involvement. It helps the church to find out how political interests manipulate and control our ministries in favour of the dominant groups in society. The questions it raises are sharp: what is the political ideology behind the present mode of evangelisation work of the church? What are the reasons that discourage Christians in their political participation? Why do people become indifferent to public issues or to issues involving rights and duties of people, especially the poor and the marginalised? What political questions do they raise about poverty, exploitation, discrimination, etc. that exist in society?

## 5. Political Ministry - Some Pointers

What forms does the political ministry of the Church take? The question is a valid one, especially since the Christian community is yet to grow in awareness to accept political engagement as a ministry.

The Canon Law is clear about the clergy's political participation. But this should not be confused with the political role of the Church or of the Christian community. Here we discuss briefly some aspects that indicate the possibilities open before us.

### *a) Ministry of healing and reconciliation*

The Church has not fully grasped the political potential of its ministry of healing and reconciliation. It has confined its sacramental presence inwardly to the Christian community. T.K. John does not hide his disappointment: "The church vanished from the face of the sub-continent when the Punjab problem was raging. Kashmir problem remains the knotty issue. The church does not exercise any mediatory role. Also the North East. Whatever be the political nature of these problems, the human issues are sufficient matter for the presence of the Gospel."<sup>16</sup>

In a country plagued by divisions and conflicts of all imaginable type, healing and reconciliation remains a major mission of the church. Class conflicts, communal riots, ethnic pogroms and caste animosities become part of the everyday life resulting in bleeding bodies and wounded psyche of the victimised. The urge for vengeance becomes part of the acceptable culture. The retaliatory reign of death that exists among diverse groups in the country points to the cycle of violence that leads only to disaster. The church in India has a unique responsibility to act as the agent of healing and reconciliation. It is hesitant to step into such situations conscious of its negligible presence, and it is yet to acquire competence and skill for the task. To make reconciliation work at the political sphere, the ritual of reconciliation needs to be freed from the narrow confines of the confessional and the prayer hall.

Nation-states usually look at situations of conflict primarily as law and order problems, and so resort to criminal procedures relying on the principle of *retributive* (punitive) *justice*. The Christian vision, on the other hand, emphasises *restorative justice*. South Africa has been a valuable laboratory of such an experiment. The Anglican Archbishop

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16 T.K. John, in *Christian Commitment to Nation Building*, ed. by Antonyraj Thumma and A. Sahayam, Bangalore: Dharamaram, 2003, 155.

and Nobel Peace winner Desmond Tutu, who steered The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, reminds us of the insufficiency of retributive justice, the main aim of which is punishment of the guilty, and affirms the centrality of restorative justice which aims at "the healing of breaches, the redressing of imbalances, the restoration of broken relationships, a seeking to rehabilitate both the victim and the perpetrator, who should be given the opportunity to be reintegrated into the community he has injured by his offence."<sup>17</sup> It is proof enough of the tremendous potential of political reconciliation in the complex world of today.

### *b) Advocacy on behalf of the excluded*

The field of advocacy, as different from charity, is emerging as an appropriate mode of political ministry. It is not easy to define advocacy as it is not understood in a uniform manner everywhere. Basically it aims at interaction with decision-makers who have the power to change a situation that is undesirable for human wellbeing, whether it is the government, corporations or international organisations. It may take various forms ranging from dialogue to political mobilisation involving agitation and confrontation. It is based on the power analysis of situations: who are the excluded and suffering? What are the reasons? Who have power to bring about change?

Two related concepts are lobbying and campaigning, though the meanings often overlap in different countries. Lobbying is usually understood as the direct process of addressing public officials and law makers, and is usually done quietly by a minority with expertise. Campaigning, on the other hand, is understood as public lobbying involving people at large, and done with active support of the media in order to raise public awareness about an issue, and to persuade policy makers. Advocacy comprises of the whole matrix of activities that include both lobbying and campaigning.

T.K. John writes: "The second phase of the freedom struggle is still going on. This is mostly at the level of the peoples' movements and the subaltern movements. These are two major areas where the freedom

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17 Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness*, New York: Image, 1997, 54.



struggle is now going on. It is here that the Christian community has to enter and participate. The many human rights movements, the civil liberties movements, the tribal, Dalit and other movements, the struggle of the deprived sections – in all these significant entry of the Christian is a necessary step.”<sup>18</sup>

### c) *Dialogue with the political establishment*

A perusal of the Statements of the General Body Meetings of the CBCI shows that dialogue with the political establishment has not become part of the Church’s agenda in any serious way.<sup>19</sup> Of the 19 CBCI Statements, most of them deal with intra-ecclesial matters, and hardly any attention is paid to church’s engagement with politics. The 25<sup>th</sup> General Body meeting held at Jalandhar in 2002 had the theme “The Church in Dialogue”. It has sections devoted to dialogue within the church, dialogue with cultures, dialogue with religions, and dialogue with the poor and the marginalised. No reference to dialogue with the political establishment is there. Documents hardly indicate a political awareness as to how to influence policies and decisions that affect the lives of the people the church opts for. It needs to politically wake up from its slumber.

The National Consultation on Christian approach to general elections 2009 prepared and presented a memorandum to political parties and candidates. The National Commission for Justice, Peace and Development of the CBCI issued *Ten Commandments for Indian Voters* indicating a healthy approach to politics.<sup>20</sup> I could find 4 principles underlying it: the basic duty to be on electoral rolls and to exercise the right to vote or not to vote; acquiring the skill in analysing political manifestos; discerning and critically assessing political parties and candidates; and finally, taking steps to report malpractices to the authorities concerned. Unfortunately those showing least interest in this area seem to be the clergy and the religious; criminal negligence in

18 T.K.John, in Thumma, op.cit., 135

19 Ronald De Souza, (ed.), *Final Statements of the General Body Meetings of CBCI (1966-2002)*, New Delhi: CBCI Centre, 2003.

20 See <http://www.cbcisite.com/cbcinews2812.hlm>

getting enrolled in the voters list, or exercising one's right to vote, is widespread among religious communities.

#### **d) *Judicious use of Pastoral Letters***

*Pastoral letters* have acquired a new political status in the emerging dynamics involving the state and religion. The shrinking-space phenomenon is forcing both of them to regain lost space, or to appropriate the space which they consider their legitimate zone. The pastoral letters of bishops as instrument of public intervention has been noted in the current discourse, especially in the run-up to the parliament elections in April-May, 2009. Elections have always remained the sacred territory of political parties; does religion have a role here? The church is convinced that it has a definite role, and these documents could be seen as attempts at asserting this role.

Pastoral letters, traditionally, were intended for the Christian faithful. Now we see its sphere expanding suddenly. First, the church leadership consciously use the pastorals not only to instruct the faithful, but also to answer the state with which it is at loggerheads. Second, the mass-media, particularly the visual channels, pay close attention to the pastorals, take up their contents for public discussion, and even celebrate them in a politically charged atmosphere. Pastoral letters have *discovered* their potential as instruments of political intervention, on the one hand; they are *being discovered* by the secular society as a new entrant in the same arena, on the other. We need to be judicious in the use of pastoral letters, at the same time. By their very nature pastoral letters communicate only in one direction, and are not consultative or dialogical. Can we not remedy this?

#### **e) *Education for Political Ministry***

Most Christians in our context are still confused or unsure of the place of politics in the plan of God, and of the political demands of their faith. They hardly see any political message in the Bible. How to prepare such Christians to assume political responsibility? This remains the task ahead. Raising questions about the quality of formation of the army of sisters in the country for political ministry, T.K. John observes: "From a close scrutiny of that which trains these large number of personnel it becomes evident that the social, economic and political content of their formation syllabus is virtually zero. Enter the seminaries

and formation houses of the men religious. There too the social, the economic and the political content of their syllabus is virtually zero. What most of them got at their university/school level is all that they have.”<sup>21</sup> The situation demands urgent remedial measures.

Political science is a popular subject being taught in many of our Christian institutions of higher education. But unfortunately their sphere of interest is confined to the merely academic, and so they do not equip students for effective political analysis or political intervention. Topics like political science, philosophy of politics, political theology, etc. remain largely unknown in our faculties of philosophy and theology. An inter-disciplinary approach in theological formation is inevitable to make theology more politically sensitive and responsive. Political ministry requires a political theology to support it. The prophetic words of the 1971 Synod of Bishops can still be the guiding post in developing such a theology: “Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel, or in other words, of the Church’s mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation.”<sup>22</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

Today we live in a context where politics enfold all spheres of our everyday life. We, as Christians, cannot ignore this fact. The Church has to be actively committed to evangelising the political life in the country. This is possible only when Christians get imbued with the spirit of the Gospel that penetrates every sphere of political life and political organisation. Theological rediscovery of politics is a new phenomenon the Church is yet to come to grips with. The social encyclicals have paved the way for an enlightened appreciation of political engagement on behalf of justice and peace. Much work needs to be done to convert these principles into action plans in concrete contexts. Initiatives like Dalit and Tribal theologies, fishermen’s struggles and environmental movements, and more recently anti-communal interventions bring us hope.

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21 T.K.John, *op. cit.*, 127.

22 Synod of Bishops, *Justice in the World*, Rome: 1971.

The era of watertight compartmentalisation of disciplines is gone. The trends of blind anti-communism or anti-capitalism also belong to a bygone era. The time is ripe for the Christian community to look afresh at its role in a world undergoing fast political changes. New analytical tools and practical skills may become necessary to take on the new role. And that remains the urgent task ahead. We need to free ourselves from a preoccupation with the past in unearthing our past contributions, instead, move ahead in charting out the unknown field of political ministry that is inviting us.

Confessional and denominational divisions among Christians do place hurdles before our political ministry. When contradictory messages flow from church leadership they are exploited by vested interests. A divided church can hardly speak with authority. This underscores the importance of an ecumenical approach to political ministry. We need to listen to the feeble voices and little movements that give expression to the prophetic mission of the church even when the official Church fails to speak up. "If these were silent, the very stones would cry out..." (Luke 19:40).

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